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OR, THE RED JAGUAR'S MISSION.

A Tale of South-California.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "OLD BALDY, THE BRIGADIER OF
BUCK BASIN," "WILD DICK TURPIN, THE
LION OF LEADVILLE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERY OF THE NIGHT.

"It is a hard struggle, but the boat will soon be here, and then, if it proves to be Peters—but I am sure it is he. He will soon be here, and then the deed must be done. I swear that I hate to harm him, but his babbling tongue must not be heard around here. He must die!"

The speaker brushed his hand somewhat nervously across his face, and then took a revolver from his pocket and looked to see if the cartridges were in their proper place.

There had been no reason to doubt that they were, but he contemplated a deed that made him ill at ease and uncertain. There was murder in his mind, and the circumstances of the case affected even his hardened heart.

RED JAGUAR LOOKED AT THE RED TRAIL, AND THEN BEGAN EXAMINING THE GROUND.

He stood upon a low cliff which faced the Pacific Ocean, and an arm of that vast water washed the rocks at his feet. A point of land ran out seaward both above and below him, but that to the north was only a sandy beach and the wind had a good sweep there.

Just then it was blowing off-shore, and the tiny sailboat which was making for land only gained distance by frequent tacking and the skill of the occupant.

Night was over the land, and the watcher on the cliff stood in a deep shadow where no casual gaze would have detected him, but the half-moon cast a pale light over the water and made the movements of the lone voyager distinct.

There was every evidence that he was unusually skillful, and he brought the craft toward shore in good form.

"Peters, sure enough," finally observed the man on the cliff, "and he's bound to get here all right. Why couldn't he have lost control of the boat and gone to the bottom? It would have saved me a pile of trouble."

Muttering thus he descended the rocks and reached the base just as the boat touched land.

"Throw me the painter!" he ordered, in a harsh voice.

The voyager obeyed, and then sprung ashore. "Glad to see you, Mr. Nettleton!" he said, in a bluff, frank manner.

Nettleton growled an unintelligible reply as he secured the painter to a point of rock.

"I needn't ask if you're well, sir, for you're looking as hale and hearty as ever."

"I'm well."

The reply was curt, almost angry, and Peters looked at the speaker, as the latter stood erect, more closely.

"Hope nothing is wrong, sir."

"Wrong? What should be wrong?"

Nettleton shot a suspicious glance at the late voyager.

"I know of nothing, sir."

"Then why do you ask?"

"I thought your manner was peculiar."

"Never mind my manner!"

It was a surly answer, but the speaker looked somewhat relieved, and he then added:

"Have you obeyed all my directions?"

"Yes, sir."

"You came to Clifftown on the steamer, arriving at seven o'clock, and then hired this boat at Jeffrey's and came over at once?"

"Exactly, sir, and, do you know, the old man cautioned me against running across Nigger Arm in the teeth of this wind. Said I'd get upset, sure."

"Did he, though?" eagerly asked Nettleton.

"Yes. Of course he didn't know I was an old sailor."

Peters took off his hat and ran his fingers through the thick black hair which stood erect upon his head. He had a good face, and, though clearly not of the intellectual class, appeared to be an honest and worthy man.

"Did you give him a history of yourself?"

Nettleton asked the question looking sharply, suspiciously at the voyager.

"Not I. I only told him that 'twould take a bigger blow than that to send Bill Peters to Davy Jones's locker. A man whose only knowledge of water life was picked up on the California coast ain't the one to give points to an old sea-dog."

"Right, Peters; you showed your usual good sense. And now we'll go to Coast Castle."

"And the boat, sir?"

"Leave it here."

"She'll chafe the painter in two and be afloat before morning, sir."

"Never mind that; I'll send a servant to look to her."

This satisfied Peters, and they ascended the rocks together. It was evidently a new locality to the sailor for he looked curiously around, but Nettleton strode along with his eyes bent on the ground, answering only in monosyllables.

His peculiar manner caused Peters to look at him again curiously, but he made no comment.

Paul Nettleton was a rich man, and Peters only his servant. They had, however, spent some years together, and their relations had been amicable. In their travels they had visited Mexico, Central and South America, and had at last come to settle in the southern part of California on the ranch belonging to Commodore Nettleton, Paul's father.

At least, Paul announced that he would settle down.

Peters had not yet been informed whether he would be retained or dismissed.

Having gone about one-fourth of a mile young Nettleton suddenly aroused.

"Look ahead, Bill," he said, "and you will see one of the most picturesque things around Coast Castle."

Peters looked.

"Do you mean them tumbled walls yonder?"

"Yes—the ruins of an old convent."

"That's what you call picturesque, is it? I remember that you had such a taste of old. I never could see any beauty in things gone to seed or to ruin."

The matter-of-fact servant lacked an artistic eye. The place, seen by moonlight, was wild and impressive in the extreme. There once

stood the convent, but, long before, it had been abandoned as such and the spirit of decay had claimed its own.

In some places the roof had fallen in, tearing a part of the walls down with it, and making a ruin wild and picturesque in the extreme. At one side stood what seemed to have been a distinct building, and this, being lighter at the top, had resisted the hand of time.

With the moon falling full upon it, and erratically blending light and shade, it was, indeed, a place to delight an artistic eye.

"Come inside," said Nettleton. "You can't comprehend the full glory of it here."

Peters, as has before been said, lacked an artistic eye, and he could see no "glory" whatever, but, perceiving that his master was in a moody state of mind, he was willing to humor any fancy that would please him.

They entered the ruins at a breach in the wall, the former entrance being filled with fallen blocks of stone.

It was like entering a tomb, and though the place was neither cold nor damp, Peters shivered.

"Be the old monks buried here?" he asked.

"Not that I am aware of. Why do you ask?"

"It seems spooky enough for it; reminds me of that old Mexican tomb we went through."

Nettleton started slightly.

"I see you still remember that."

"Rather! It's hard to forget."

"I hope you did not mention it at Clifftown?"

"Certainly not. That's your secret, not mine."

There was a moment's silence, during which Nettleton seemed in deep thought. Peters looked sharply about. The moonlight fell in the middle of the space between walls, but where they stood all was dark.

"I believe I should like to see this hole by day," Peters added, though he believed nothing of the kind. "But it's too dark investigating at night, and I can't get rid of a haunting fear that the spirits of them old monks is a-perambulating around. I feel uneasy. If you don't object, I'll stand outside while you look around."

"We will both go. I only wished to show you the place. One moment, Peters. I trust your aversion to this place does not rise from any sting of conscience. You have no great sin on your record to account for?"

Peters laughed.

"Not a sin. I'm a happy-go-lucky chap, but there isn't a blot on my 'scutcheon."

"I am glad. Now turn, William, and pass out."

"You bet!"

Peters turned and took two steps toward the breach in the wall. The third was not taken.

While they talked Nettleton had stood with one hand in his pocket, and as the servant turned, the hand was withdrawn and thrust out toward him.

Then came a bright flash which for a moment dissipated the dark shadow and showed Paul Nettleton's face strangely tense and white; a flash and a report, and then the shadows returned and a little cloud of smoke floated lazily out through the breach in the wall.

When it was gone, Nettleton still stood there, but Bill Peters lay prostrate at his feet, as still as the walls of the old convent, and in a plight far more mournful.

Paul Nettleton's hand shook as though with ague, and the revolver almost fell from his grasp.

He had done a deed most foul, and his nerves were not so steel-like as to enable him to bear it philosophically. He had gone on remorselessly to the accomplishment of the deed, but now that the body was lying there so still and terrible, fear and dismay seized upon him.

He remembered what Peters had said about the ghosts of the old monks, and looked about in fear and trembling, almost expecting to see a phantom appear. If the place had not been haunted before, it surely had reason to be now.

A measure of his audacity soon returned, however, for it was not the first dark deed in his life, and he thrust the revolver back into his pocket and turned away.

Moving a few steps, he bent over a flat stone, seized it and lifted stoutly. It moved, and he turned it over. Underneath was a hole extending down into the ground, and the fresh earth indicated that it had been recently made.

He next went back to Peters, or all that was left of him, seized him by the arms and bore him to the excavation; after which the body was tumbled in without ceremony. It went down, struck with a heavy sound, and, as the grave was in shadow, became invisible.

Next, Nettleton produced a spade from under another stone, and began to refill the excavation with all possible haste. His composure had in a measure returned, and he worked to such good advantage, that the hole was soon filled, and three feet of dirt piled upon the body he had dumped in.

This done, he replaced the flat stone and removed all signs of his work as far as he was able.

He breathed a deep sigh of relief as he did so, and wiped the perspiration from his forehead—

perspiration called there more by fear than exertion.

Gloomy and forsaken as the convent seemed, he had been terribly afraid of discovery.

At last, however, the worst was over, and he began to feel more at ease. His spade he concealed once more, but not in the convent. Inquisitive eyes might find it there, but there was one place where it seemed safe; at the bottom of Nigger Arm.

So he went down to the water's edge again, placed the spade in the boat, cast off the painter and put away from shore.

At first the craft moved slowly, for the rocks broke the force of the wind, but after going a short distance, it struck the belt of wind which swept over the sand point, and, plainly, could have been sailed across to Clifftown in grand style.

But Paul Nettleton had no desire to cross Nigger Arm; he had gone quite far enough, and he prepared to leave the boat. First of all, he dropped the spade overboard; then he threw the boat around so that the wind caught and overturned her in a moment.

He was a good swimmer, and, easily hovering at one side, he watched the capsized boat as it drifted away with the strong sweep of the waters.

It was moving toward Clifftown, and must inevitably drive ashore there. This was just what he wanted, and with a satisfied smile he swam ashore.

Once there he completely disrobed, rolled his wet garments into a bundle, and thrust it into a recess among the rocks. From a similar place he took out a second and dry suit, which he quickly donned.

His night's work then seemed nearly done, but he suddenly stopped, and a troubled look passed over his face.

"My revolver!" he exclaimed. "I had forgotten that. Where is it?"

He had thrust the weapon with which he had shot Bill Peters into his pocket when the deed was done, and then forgotten it. The coat was in the bundle he had lately put away, but he felt sure the revolver was not there. He hurriedly drew out the bundle and unrolled it.

As he had expected, there was no sign of the revolver, and he stood staring at vacancy in startled surprise.

CHAPTER II.

WHO WAS HE?

PAUL NETTLETON would not willingly have lost that revolver for a good deal of money. Bill Peters lay amid the convent ruins with a bullet in his body which would exactly fit the revolver, and the revolver lay somewhere, minus one cartridge.

The assassin did not expect that the body would ever be found, but it might. In any case, the loss of the revolver worried him. Had he known it was at the bottom of Nigger Arm he would not have cared, but he felt sure it was not there.

He believed he had lost it in or near the convent.

When he put it away it had been in the lower outside pocket of his sack coat, and the coat had not been buttoned. Such being the case, the revolver would have flapped the pocket against him as he strode down to Nigger Arm.

Nothing of the kind had occurred, and he felt sure the revolver had been lost in the ruins.

He went there and searched for it, but found nothing.

All these events had consumed a good deal of time; so much so that he was getting nervous. He could not remain to search any longer, but must get back home.

In the morning he could come again.

Of course he could easily find the revolver then, and it would not be such disagreeable hunting. He was a practical, hard-headed man, but somehow, since the dark deed he had committed, he fell to thinking of what Peters had said about the ghosts of the old monks.

Surely, if there had been ghosts there before, there ought to be more abroad since murder had been done there.

He thought of this; then told himself he was a fool; then left the convent and strode rapidly northward.

Who was Paul Nettleton?

Half a mile from the ruined convent stood one of the finest houses to be found in the southern part of California. It was the property of Commodore Nicodemus Nettleton, a retired mariner and man of wealth. He owned upwards of a hundred acres of land about Coast Castle, as he called his house, and grew some fruit in a business way, but he never cared a fig whether said business brought in a dollar or not.

What did delight him was the fact that from any part of the west side of his house, he could see a portion of the mighty Pacific rolling constantly to, or from, the land.

He had abandoned sea-life as a calling because he was an old man, but would not go where he could not see his loved element.

He was a widower with one son and one daughter—Paul and Barbara.

For years Paul had been a wanderer, and though he had confined his operations to the Americas, he had done a vast amount of traveling and exploring in the six years following his twenty-first birthday.

At last he had returned to his father's roof, and it was understood that he would travel no more.

A double object had brought him home. Three days from the time he arrived, and twenty four hours later than the scene of the previous chapter, Barbara Nettleton was to become Mrs. Palmer Hague, by marrying the owner of a neighboring ranch.

Moreover, it was said that Paul would soon marry. One of the inmates of Coast Castle was Leona Erwin, an orphan girl who had all her life been the commodore's ward.

Having been reared with Barbara she was like a daughter of the house, and it was thought she would become so in reality by marrying Paul. It had been the old commodore's pet ambition that they should marry, and he had betrothed them ten years before.

Neither had ever shown a disposition to retreat from the childish bargain, and it was said they would marry within six months.

Such was Paul Nettleton, and such were his friends and surroundings; but one might well inquire in wonder why he had that night stained his hands with the blood of a fellow-creature, and that, too, one who had served him faithfully as a servant for years.

Commodore Nettleton had himself selected Peters as his son's attendant because he knew he had a heart of oak, and Peters had been always faithful.

Then why had he been so foully slain by the man who owed him even life? Yes, life; for more than once the arm of stout Bill Peters had interposed to save the younger man from human and brute foes.

And in the end his reward had been an assassin's bullet and a nameless grave in the old convent.

But why had he been murdered?

It was a secret from all except Paul Nettleton, and he desired the secret to remain forever in the grave of the man who had never done him any wrong, yet whom he had sent out of life suddenly, cruelly, and without preparation for the great change.

Paul went home, retired, and slept well.

In the morning he met the family at breakfast, the party including the commodore, Barbara, Miss Erwin and himself.

The senior Nettleton was sixty-five years old, of medium height but very stoutly built, and he looked as he acted, like a bluff, hearty old seadog, but his heart was one of the kindest.

Barbara and Leona differed greatly in appearance. The former was a blonde, tall, dignified, and queenly in her ways; the latter was a little maiden, quick of speech and motion, and a brunette in the full sense of the word.

"Well, my boy," said the commodore, when greetings were over, "did your servant come to anchor last night?"

"No," calmly answered Paul. "I waited for him by Nigger Arm, but he did not appear. Probably missed the boat for Clifftown."

"I wouldn't have thought it of Peters, but when a man has been six years from sea, he ain't the same old timber. Who are the letters for, Bob?"

A servant had brought in several, and handed them to Barbara.

"Two for you and one for Paul. Leona and I are slighted."

She passed the letters over as she spoke, and Paul promptly opened his own. It was brief and soon read. He looked up with a smile.

"I am to have a visitor to-day?"

"Indeed!" said his sister, with some surprise. "May I ask who?"

"Certainly. It is Professor Hazlitt."

"And who the deuce is he?" the commodore asked.

"A very learned man; a friend of mine whom I invited some time ago to visit me here. I did not expect him so soon; I trust he will not be in the way."

"Not in the least, my boy; the more we have at the wedding to-night—don't blush, Bab—the better. But if he's any gay young blade who will go making love to my second daughter, I shall give him but a cold welcome to Coast Castle."

"Perhaps I can welcome him so he will be consoled!" retorted Leona.

"Rest easy, all of you," interrupted Paul. "Professor Hazlitt is sixty years old, and a husband already."

"Zounds! I didn't suspect you chose such cronies, my boy, but I'm glad to see it. A professor, eh? What 'ism' does he preach?"

"All that relate to learning."

"Does he know a belying-pin from a mainmast?"

"I believe he's quite a sailor."

"Then let him come—by Neptune! let him come. The more the merrier, and I'll show him how old Nick Nettleton marries off his daughters. Oh! it'll be a big blow-out to-night. Everybody will be here, and—"

"All except the Hermit," interrupted Leona.

"Just so. He's not invited, and I won't have him invited, either."

"Who in the world is the Hermit?" asked Paul, his attention arrested by the peculiar name.

"The chap who owns the old convent."

"Ah! But that don't enlighten me. It never before occurred to me that the convent had an owner. Where does he live?—at the village?"

"You haven't got posted yet, my boy. Live in the village? Not much! Mr. Frazer Hot Heart, as he calls himself, lives on his princely estate; he lives in the convent—a queer chap with a queer name."

Paul Nettleton dropped his fork.

The information would in any case have surprised him, for to think of the convent in its present condition as a place of abode seemed wild in the extreme; but it was something more than surprise which suddenly made his grasp a nerveless one.

Dismay and terror assailed him at the commodore's startling revelation.

If any one lived in the old convent, he had been, if at home, near enough to hear the shot which had taken Bill Peters so rudely out of the way!

It was well for Paul that his face betrayed little of his thought, and that nobody thought to glance at him. As good control as he had over his face, he would have betrayed something more than surprise.

Perhaps there had been an eye-witness to his crime!

"Kinder surprises you, don't it?" added the commodore, looking only at his food. "Hardly thought to find a human being dwelling in them old ruins, did you? Well, nobody but a lunatic would, and that's just what sort of a craft this Hot Heart is—as rakish-looking as a pirate and as full of the devil as a swivel-gun."

"Crazy?"

"In my opinion he is merely eccentric," remarked Miss Barbara, with more firmness than seemed necessary.

"He's so blamed eccentric that he'd get a rope's end every day, if he was aboard ship!" the commodore retorted.

"Do let me explain, or Paul will never get an explanation," put in Leona, merrily. "This Mr. Hot Heart is a charming young man of about your age, Paul; a tall, strong, handsome fellow, of gallant, dashing manners. He rides a horse like a Centaur; is brave as a lion, and always ready to fight in a good cause. In a word, had he lived in the Middle Ages, he would have been a veritable knight of the ungloved hand."

"More likely, he'd got quartered, or broken on the wheel, for his knight-errant business. In plain words, my boy, he is a gentleman pirate who has purchased a small strip of land on the south side of our ranch. Said strip includes the ruined convent, and you may rake me fore-and-aft if he don't live there, all alone, a real Hermit—so he is called Hot Heart the Hermit."

"That's a queer taste."

"Well, he's queer. He's now been there about a month, and during that time he has had fights with several different men. Indeed, he's so confounded mettlesome that he's got the nickname of 'The Fire-Eater'—always ready to take up any man who deserves a black eye."

"What brought him here?"

"Give it up; nobody knows but himself."

"Where did he come from?"

"Nobody knows that. I've never had a word with him, and don't want to. I've been in many a fight, but only when forced to it, and I don't take to such powder-kegs as he. All the high-toned people give him the cold shoulder, and he just stays in the ruins and lives like a hermit. But let us drop the Fire-Eater; I don't like the subject."

The old commodore's wishes were respected, but Paul could not govern his thoughts. They dwelt persistently upon the strange occupant of the ruins.

He already feared the strange man.

What if this Hermit had been a witness to the shooting of Bill Peters?

Paul's blood actually seemed to grow cold at the thought.

Paul finished his breakfast in a most unenviable frame of mind, and then lighted a cigar and left the house.

He had intended to go at once to the old convent and make another effort to find his lost revolver, but would it not be madness to go there and search?

He was now between two foes.

He had intended to complete the removal of everything which would betray the fact that a grave had been dug there; and now he was afraid tell-tale signs still existed, but dared not go to remove them.

While he was still considering the situation he saw a galloping, ridden horse approaching the house. It came from the direction of the ruins, and though there was a more likely construction to put on the case, he was seized with a deadly fear that this might be the Fire-Eater, coming to accuse him of murder.

The thought made him tremble like a leaf.

CHAPTER III.

THE FIRE-EATER.

THE horseman came nearer and clattered up to the house. He proved not in the least to answer the description of Mr. Frazer Hot Heart, and Paul forced himself to be calm as the rider neared him.

The new-comer spoke quickly:

"Beg pardon, but ain't this Mr. Paul Nettleton?"

"Yes."

"I'm from Clifftown, an' I'm sent to ask if a man named Peters—a sort of sailor-looking chap—came here last night?"

Paul breathed more freely. He had anticipated this question days before, and was ready to answer it. As it did not imply that Hot Heart had interfered with what did not concern him, Nettleton was able to answer calmly:

"No, Peters did not come. He is my servant, who was to join me last night, but as he was delayed, he will probably come to-day."

"But, Mr. Nettleton, he came to Clifftown."

"He did?"

"Yes; and hired a boat of Jeffrey to sail across Nigger Arm during the evening."

"That's odd; I haven't seen him."

"That ain't all either. The boat drifted back to Clifftown, bottom side up, and there is every reason to believe she got upset."

"Ha! is that so? By Jove! I'm afraid harm has come to Peters; I really am."

"You may well fear it. If you have caught onto things around here, you must know that the wind 'most always blows stiff across Nigger Arm. Well, last night it was sweepin' along sharp, and old Jeffrey, he warned Peters not to try to make the trip. Told him he'd get upset, sure, but your man would cross, an' off he went."

"And the boat drifted back vacant?"

"Just so; an' wrong side up."

"By Jove! this looks bad. You see, I waited for Peters on the shore, for I expected him, but not a sight did I get of him or the boat. Wait!—let me inform my father!"

Paul was ready to do some fine acting, and he hurried away and poured out his little story impetuously.

The old commodore heard in silence, and then shook his head slowly.

"I don't believe you need worry about Bill Peters. He ain't the lad to be drowned after sailing the salt sea half his life. Maybe he didn't go out in the boat after all, and even if he did, I'd risk him to swim Nigger Arm in any wind we've had lately."

"But a sail may have knocked him senseless when the boat overset, or—"

"I don't think it. Where's the messenger?"

"Outside."

"I'll see him."

"He believes Peters is dead."

"Well, don't you be in a rush to get that old sea-dog into his grave. I'll bet he's all right. Lord bless you, could Bill Peters be drowned in Nigger Arm when he's played tag with the Pacific, year in and out, and never got ketched? Not much!"

"But it looks like it."

"Nonsense! You ought to know Peters better."

And the commodore hurried out to see the messenger from Clifftown. He heard the story in full, and learned that every one at the village believed the missing man drowned, but his own faith did not waver for a moment.

He had known Bill Peters for nearly a score of years, and laughed at the idea of his being drowned in Nigger Arm after defying the broad ocean for so long.

Paul heard this with a dark frown. It was a vital matter to him that his trick about the boat should work well, and when outsiders did believe, here was his own father casting doubts upon it.

"How else can you account for his absence?" the young man asked.

"I don't account for it; it ain't necessary. Bill Peters can care for himself. My man, just you go back to town and tell them folks there that Peters is all right. He'll yet show up and prove what I say; don't you worry about him!"

And the messenger went away with this scant reward for his trouble.

Paul then endeavored to change the old commodore's views, which threatened to make serious trouble for him, but might as well have wrestled with the winds of the ocean. The senior Nettleton would persist in treating it as a minor matter, and in declaring that the missing man would yet make his appearance all right.

"He never got drowned in Nigger Arm!" was the stubborn ultimatum, which put Paul in a most unenviable mood.

About an hour later the young man was called to the window by Leona Erwin.

"Look!" she said, "and you may see the renowned Hot Heart the Hermit!"

Paul obeyed, but, as the road was some distance from the house, he saw little more than a wild-looking young man with jet-black hair, who went tearing along on a black horse as though pursued by a horde of invisible demons, or something equally dangerous.

He could see little regarding the Fire-Eater's actual looks, and the incident was of importance in only one way; it showed that Hot Heart was for the time away from the old convent.

It was a chance to search for his lost revolver by day, which he would not miss.

He excused himself and went quickly, but secretly, to the ruins. All there seemed as on the previous day, but as he looked more closely at the smaller building—the only place where Hot Heart could find a roof to shelter him—he saw that a new door had been placed at the entrance, and painted to resemble the weather-beaten stone blocks of which the walls were made.

"Curse my stupidity in not seeing it before!" he said aloud; "but the deed is done, and there's no good in grieving. I'd like to store gunpowder under it and blow the man to pieces; I feel that he is destined to do me harm."

He made a circuit of the Hermit's quarters, and was tempted to try and effect an entrance, but remembering that time was passing, entered the ruins of the main building.

Everything seemed to be as he had left it. The flat stone still lay over Peter's grave. He raised it and found the earth undisturbed. The revolver, however, was not to be found. He searched the place thoroughly, but without result.

He then devoted some time to removing every particle of crumbled earth which he had before scattered about. In digging the grave he had carried the waste dirt to the water and dumped it in, and when the fine pieces were put away, there was nothing to betray him in the mere appearance of the place.

Nevertheless, he was nervous and ill at ease.

He had dug the grave and shot its occupant almost under the windows of Hot Heart's strange abode.

Could it be the Hermit had remained ignorant of all that had been done?

The rattling of a stone caused him to start guiltily. He looked up quickly. There, in the breach in the wall, stood the Hermit himself, looking at him quietly.

Paul felt the color leaving his face, but the new-comer nodded in a friendly way.

"Taking a look at the ruins?"

"Yes."

Paul managed to say the single word; he could not have spoken more under any pressure.

"Rather a romantic spot."

"Yes."

The Hermit sat down on a projecting stone of the wall.

"I'm lord of this domain," he said, quietly. "Bought it for a song, and find that it answers my purpose well. Some people wonder at my taste, but we can't all dwell in marble halls. I take it you are Mr. Nettleton, junior?"

"Yes, that's my name."

"Been traveling, eh?"

"For some years—yes."

The Hermit did not seem in the least quarrelsome just then. On the contrary, his manner was so quiet and easy that Paul began to gain courage and recover his usual outward composure.

"Fine place the commodore has over there."

"For this region it is."

"Just so. So you have a wedding there to-night?"

"Yes."

"I'm not invited?"

Paul could not, to save his life, have told whether there was a sting behind these carelessly-spoken words. He felt angry that a stranger should dare refer so familiarly to his sister's approaching union with Palmer Hague, but until he was sure that Frazer did not suspect anything about the tragedy of the previous night, he dared not make objection.

"I have not been given a list of the invited guests," he replied, after a pause. "Besides, I know no one here."

"You'll find them a mixed population, in every way. There is Hague, the groom of to-night's joyful occasion; Don Esteban Villegas, the Mexico nabob who lives to the south; Philip Warburton, an honest young fellow who is your father's overseer; Mrs. Drake and Rosa Strong, who are servants in your honored sire's house; Welch and Jigson, male servants of same, and suitors for Rosa's hand; and Garth Griffith—do you know him?"

"Never even heard of him."

"A half-breed; low-browed, hang-dog-faced and surly; a good man not to know. Avoid him! He skulks in bushes and out-of-the-way places, like a sneaking wolf. Indeed, he is often called the 'Bush-Wolf.' Know Red Jaguar?"

"No."

"Indian chief; rules over the handful of redskins about here, and calls himself a Mohave. What's in a name? He may be a Pawnee, Shawnee or Knock-knee for all I know. Queer blade that Indian servant of the commodore's is."

The Hermit sat there and talked quietly, carelessly, almost constantly; showing that he knew a good deal more about people in and around Coast Castle, than was to be expected.

Paul wished himself away, but there sat the Fire-Eater in the breach, and in the way.

"I barely know that my father has an Indian servant whose name is Loyola; a woman he picked up years ago on the coast of Mexico," said Paul, answering the last remark of his companion.

"Exactly. You'll find there's a heap of fun in her."

"She seems rather surly to me."

"Youth is perennial with her, and she is as young and coy at sixty as she was at sixteen."

Paul looked keenly at the man. If he was jesting, there was not a thing about his face to betray the fact, but the commodore's son could not believe the words were serious. The man seemed to him like a mocking Lucifer.

Suddenly the Fire-Eater arose.

"You'll excuse me," he said, "but I must retire to my den now. I'm glad to have met you, Mr. Nettleton, and I feel sure we shall be better acquainted before a year and a day. Good-day!"

At the last word he smiled, waved his hand, then disappeared from the breach in the wall.

He went at once to his strange dwelling-place, produced a ponderous key and entered. Not once had he looked back, but when inside he glanced out of one of the curious little windows and smiled quietly.

"Mr. Nettleton is going straight home. Of course he will enjoy life there, and not the least enjoyable feature will be Loyola, the Indian woman. As I said, Paul will find a heap of fun in her!"

CHAPTER IV.

AN INTERRUPTED WEDDING.

PAUL NETTLETON went home in anything but an enviable frame of mind. He had seen Mr. Frazer Hot Heart, and nothing had been said to indicate that the latter suspected that a man had been shot down at that very spot but a few hours before, but Paul was not encouraged thereat.

Judging by what he had seen of the Hermit he believed him to be a deep, wily, dangerous man, who could hide his feelings and knowledge, only, perhaps, to spring an accusation on his helpless victim when least expected.

"Oh! if he was only dead and buried, like Bill Peters!"

Paul muttered the words through his teeth, and his hand worked nervously on the butt of the revolver which had replaced the lost one.

"It would be a reckless thing to do," he thought, "but that man may bring me to the gallows if I let him go on. There was something villainous in the way he talked to me. That nonchalance was all put on—I think—and I'm afraid he suspects!"

Truly, it was a heavy mind he carried back, and he lost no time in trying to convince the commodore that Bill Peters had been drowned in Nigger Arm.

If trouble threatened him, he ought, at least, to have his father of his way of thinking.

Again he failed.

The elder Nettleton refused to believe.

"Don't tell me that Peters has been laid low by Nigger Arm!" he said, getting a trifle angry at Paul's persistence after awhile. "If there's anything wrong, I'd quicker believe Bill has met with foul play."

Paul was too startled to reply, and as Barbara swept into the room the subject was dropped.

The afternoon was memorable for two things.

The first of these was the arrival of Paul's guest, Professor Hazlitt. When he appeared Paul's friends were astonished. They understood that he came merely as a friend, but he seemed a most remarkable associate for a gay young man.

He was well advanced in years, with very gray hair and beard; a little, old gentleman who looked as though he might have been dried and preserved from some former age; and, instead of being gay and lively, as the commodore had expected and hoped, he proved to be a man of very few words.

A more taciturn, silent man Nick Nettleton had never seen, and an iceberg could not have been colder. When he did speak his language was that of an intelligent, educated man; but he plainly preferred not to speak at all; and his monosyllabic way of answering questions amounted almost to rudeness.

Every one except Paul declared that a strange man, a semi-mute, an iceberg and a mystery had descended on Coast Castle.

What in the world could Paul want of such a person?

He answered the question simply:

"The professor is shy, especially in the presence of ladies. When he gets well acquainted he will thaw out and be as genial as any of us."

But Leona gave her opinion to Barbara in these words:

"When the Arctic icebergs thaw Professor Hazlitt will; and as for his shyness, it's all moonshine. Depend upon it, Bab, the professor is a deep one. I feel as though the air of Coast Castle was tainted with deep and deadly mystery since he came."

But the learned man seemed oblivious to all

this, and sat around as calm, well-behaved, and almost as silent, as though he had been a statue.

The second of the two events before mentioned naturally drew attention from the professor.

That evening Barbara was to become the wife of Palmer Hague, and great was the confusion and excitement among the female inmates of the house. Leona and Miss Nettleton's maid, Rosa Strong, were in constant attendance on the bride-elect; Mrs. Drake, the housekeeper, wept fitfully, yet copiously, as women will on such eventful occasions; and even Loyola, the Indian woman, showed interest.

This is saying a good deal for Loyola, who was usually as silent as Professor Hazlitt.

Darkness fell at last, and the hour for the ceremony grew near.

The guests began to arrive. The best people of Clifftown came, and so did Don Esteban Villegas, the Mexican noble, who lived just south of the ruined convent, and prided himself on being descended from Esteban Manuel de Villegas, the Spanish poet of the seventeenth century.

Among the last to arrive were the minister and the groom.

Palmer Hague was a slightly-built young man of gentlemanly manners and some fortune. He had known Barbara in San Francisco, and when the Nettletons came South to settle, he came too, bought a ranch, visited them often and became the girl's accepted lover.

This was about all that the other neighbors knew about him, or could, either.

There were some who thought that Barbara did not love him very warmly, but that was her affair, not theirs.

At the appointed hour the minister arose to perform the ceremony. The bride and groom took their places. The spectators, especially the younger ones, were very much moved. They expected something of interest.

They were not disappointed.

Just as the minister opened his lips to begin the ceremony, footsteps rung on the floor with force, which seemed sacrilegious at that moment.

All looked to see the cause of the disturbance, and then into their midst strode Frazer Hot Heart, the Fire-Eater, booted and spurred. Invited or not, he had come to the wedding!

But Mr. Hot Heart removed his hat with careless politeness, and lightly remarked:

"Sorry to interrupt the festivities, but as it's against the law for a man to have two wives, I thought I'd drop in. It was no trouble; I was passing."

It was a startling speech to spring upon a wedding party, and only a trifle toned down by the fact that there was no positive assurance that the strange man meant all that he conveyed.

Commodore Nettleton was among those who thought he did not, and he moved forward a step, a red flush rising to his cheek, to show this intruder that he could not come there and insult the party.

Very likely it was the trick of a dare-devil to be avenged on those who had slighted him when sending invitations.

But Barbara moved quicker than her father.

She sprung away from Palmer Hague and toward the unwelcome guest.

"What do you mean?" she cried, and it almost seemed that her voice was an eager one.

"Excuse me," he coolly replied, "but I thought maybe you wasn't aware that there was another wife."

"Again I say, what do you mean? Has Palmer Hague already a wife?"

"One, I'll be sworn. Possibly a dozen."

The groom strode forward, his face almost purple with rage.

"It is false!" he shouted. "You scoundrel, you lie!"

"That settles it," tranquilly replied Hot Heart. "We shall have to fight. Name your weapon—revolver, knife, sword or rifle. You'll excuse me if I don't thrash you right here, for I'm sure the ladies would object."

And he bowed gracefully to those last mentioned.

"You shall have all the fighting you want!" declared Hague, hotly.

"Thank you; I thought very likely you would join me in a little picnic of that kind. I'm sure I'll enjoy it."

But the old commodore came to the front at this point, his anger at fever heat.

"How dare you come here with this trumped-up tale?" he shouted, as though directing sailors in a squall.

He raised his huge fist, and would have shaken it in Hot Heart's face, but Barbara caught the hand and prevented the gesture.

"We want the truth, father!" she said, her voice ringing out as clearly as though she was a judge, sitting on the bench in a case wherein she had no personal interest. "Mr. Frazer, you have intimated that Palmer Hague is already a married man. Tell me what grounds you have for making the charge."

The Fire-Eater bowed politely, at the polite address, but Hague again interrupted furiously.

"What!" he cried, "am I to stand here and

listen to a ridiculous charge from a vicious braggart?"

"We are going to have the truth," Miss Nettleton retorted. "Don't think, Palmer Hague, that I am going to marry any man who has an unexplained charge hanging over his head!"

It was a time of thrilling interest to the spectators, but those who had always doubted that Barbara loved Hague believed that they now saw their suspicions confirmed. They doubted, too, if the marriage would ever take place, even though Hot Heart's charge fell to the ground.

Hague shrunk back before the girl's imperious words and manner, and she turned to Frazer.

"Speak out!" she said. "Tell all you know."

"It's only a trifle, but I thought possibly you would like to know. Hague has another wife in Frisco; married her five years ago. Her name was Zenobia Lee, daughter of a 'Forty-niner. If anybody doubts my word, write to the present Mayor of Frisco. He knows both her and Hague, as the would-be bridegroom only too well understands."

"Are you sure there has been no divorce?" asked the minister, somewhat sternly.

"Dead sure!"

"And that Zenobia Lee Hague is alive?"

"No doubt of it."

Barbara Nettleton turned on the white-faced, angry, but now cowering groom like a tragedy queen.

"You scoundrel!" she breathed, rather than spoke, "are you not proud of your work? So you would have committed bigamy, and ruined my life forever! Oh! coward, coward! you are the most contemptible of men!"

Commodore Nettleton did not believe in any man being condemned unheard, and though utter stupefaction and his daughter's course had up to this time kept him in the background, he was about to press to the front and declare that Hague should have a fair chance when that person, himself, destroyed all hope of getting a champion.

To use a slang expression, Hague "threw up the sponge."

He had the will to commit crime, but not the nerve to face exposure.

He was guilty, and, giving up hope, now thought only of being revenged on Hot Heart and Miss Nettleton.

"You need not come the heroic," he said; sneeringly to the latter, "all I wanted was your money. You are freely released from your engagement to me, and you can go your way."

He turned to Hot Heart, a glitter in his eyes.

"Maybe your record is as bad as mine," he said, "and if it is, I'll know it. From this moment I devote my time to investigating you. I will learn just who you are and I'll see you lodged in prison before a twelvemonth."

This threat was hissed forth madly, but the Fire-Eater laughed and carelessly replied:

"Bless you, why take all this trouble? Let's settle it with revolvers to-morrow morning. A nice, quiet little duel will prove exhilarating and wipe out all bad blood. Come, what do you say?"

"I won't fight."

"Why not?"

"Because I prefer to pay you in your own coin."

"Excuse me, but you will fight or be branded a coward. You have applied such words as 'scoundrel' and the like to me, and I don't allow that from any man. This is no place or time for talk like this, but you shall hear from me again."

The Fire-Eater turned and bowed to the rest of the company in his politest manner.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I trust I have not spoiled all the festivities of the evening. I wish you all good-evening!"

Another bow, and the man was striding from the house with quick, light steps.

He disappeared; the clatter of horse's hoofs was heard; then Palmer Hague came from the side-room into which he had gone, all prepared for the open air.

Nobody objected to his departure, and without a glance at her who had so nearly become his bride, he strode from the house as Hot Heart had done just before him, only with a heavier, more vicious tread.

And this was the end of the marriage gathering.

CHAPTER V.

SHOT IN THE BACK.

THE guests now found them elves awkwardly placed.

Was, or was not, this a case where they were called upon to condole with the chief sufferers?

Neither they nor the family seemed to have any words ready for use, though Barbara Nettleton held her proud head as high as ever, and seemed not a particle cast down; but the opinion became general, without consultation, that the sooner the guests left Coast Castle behind them, the better it would be for all parties.

They went, without standing much on the order of their going, and only the regular inmates of the house and Professor Hazlitt remained.

The latter had not spoken since Hot Heart's invasion of the room. His large, calm, intelligent eyes had seen all, but he said nothing. He now seemed almost oblivious of the presence of the others and—himself.

Commodore Nettleton was a very angry man, but his daughter disposed of him as summarily as she had done when the Hermit was making explanation.

Turning on her friends she spoke in a strong, clear voice:

"Some of you are my elders in point of years, but I lay one command upon all: Never mention the events of to-night again. Whoever utters the name of Palmer Hague in my presence, makes me his, or her enemy. Let silence fall over the miserable events of to-night. Come, Leona!"

Followed by Miss Erwin, Barbara swept from the room as regally as though no cares or troubles ever perplexed the head of the queen.

Professor Hazlitt removed a silver box from his pocket and took a pinch of snuff. He always carried the box, but did not fill it six times a year. When he took snuff it was a sign that he had seen, heard or suspected something remarkable.

His thoughts might now be interpreted as follows:

"There is more to this matter than appears on the surface. It might be quite interesting to know why Miss Nettleton promised to marry Hague. She did not love him, nor could he give her the money and social position she now enjoys. She is a riddle which I must solve."

Commodore Nettleton caught sight of the grim face of the silent man.

It was like an additional dash of cold water.

He longed to pitch the professor out of doors then, but, like the whole-souled man he was, refrained.

"Let the house be closed at once," he directed, "and you, Paul, come to my room."

He wheeled and stalked away, but paused at the door and looked back. Paul had not started.

"Ain't you coming?" the commodore irritably asked.

"As soon as I've seen the house properly closed, sir."

"The servants will see to that."

"I think I will remain and make sure, father."

"Neptune and mermaids!" cried the old mariner, "what bee have you got in your bonnet? I remember you went a-spookin' all over the house last night, trying all the windows like an old woman. Very likely you looked under your bed for burglars, too. And you've slept night after night in the jungle where the jaguar and pump, and what-not roam, with no covering but the sky. Zounds! you're a queer one to be scared!"

Paul seemed very much annoyed.

"Remember the girls, father," he urged.

"Remember fiddlesticks! It ain't for them you're so wrought up. Hey, boy, have you brought home a trunkful of diamonds or gold?"

Paul actually looked startled, as he glanced at the two women servants—Mrs. Drake and Rosa Strong—who had heard the last question.

"Nonsense!" he said, sharply. "I have not brought either, nor have I five dollars to my name to-day. You talk wildly, father. Go to your room, and I will soon join you."

The commodore rattled away in anything but good-humor. Paul remained, and before he retired for the night he had personally seen that every door was locked, and every window of unoccupied rooms carefully fastened.

Really, this did seem unusual care for a fighter of the fiercest of American beasts to take in a civilized community.

But no robber, or other lawless person, came to Coast Castle that night; the inmates of the house certainly had no cause to lose sleep, except such as existed in their own minds.

Morning came, and the family, including Hazlitt, met at the breakfast table. No reference was made to the events of the previous evening, but Commodore Nick sat in silence as profound as that of the professor. Not so the young ladies. With that charming insincerity of seeming to be at ease when most annoyed which is common to women, they chattered continually.

Breakfast over, the commodore left the house.

"By Neptune! I want fresh air!" he muttered.

He went out and was met at the piazza by a horseman—one of his field-hands—who had just galloped up.

"Commodore," he said, quickly, "there is bad news!"

"Humph!"

"Startling news!"

"You may tell it."

"A man lies over there, sir, between the road and bushes, cold and dead."

Commodore Nick's indifference vanished in a moment.

"Zounds! who is he?"

"Palmer Hague!"

The old mariner stared in blank amazement, dimly conscious that the shadow of trouble was falling over and about him.

"More than that," added the messenger, "he was brought to his end through violence—evidently murdered!"

"Murdered!"

"Yes. Mr. Warburton and I found the body, and he remained with it while I came to you, sir."

The commodore was startled and shocked. When Hague failed to defend himself against the charge made by Hot Heart there was no way except to set him down a rascal, but this tragedy did much toward blotting out his misdemeanors, and appealed to the justice, if not the pity, of all honest men.

So the old sailor had his horse brought, and he galloped over to the scene of the tragedy.

Philip Warburton, the overseer, was watching at the spot.

At that point the Clifftown road curved slightly, the eastern side being fringed with trees and bushes. These were separated from the road by a space of about twelve feet.

Midway in this space lay Palmer Hague's body upon the right side. It looked composed enough, but the little red line which stretched back to the road showed that he had not fallen thus; he had been dragged to where he now lay.

"This is bad business, Warburton," said the commodore.

"It is, indeed, sir."

"Are you sure it is a case of murder?"

"Look here!"

The overseer pointed to a small, round hole in the back of the dead man's coat.

"That is where the bullet entered, commodore. Of course the wound was not self-inflicted, and the only explanation is that an assassin shot him in the back."

"It was a cowardly deed, anyhow."

"You are right."

"Who could have done it?"

"I am not prepared to say, sir, but we have a mixed and uncertain population about here. The Indians are reputed harmless, but I am not sure they are so."

"For instance, the chief, Red Jaguar, or whatever his name is. He's no chicken, I'll swear."

"I have a good opinion of the chief," said Warburton, slowly. "I have often met him, and should be sorry to think him an assassin. He is, at least, a remarkably intelligent man. His English is as good as mine, and his mind strong and comprehensive."

"Talk of the devil, and here he comes," suddenly observed the man who had brought Nettleton to the place.

The other two men looked up quickly.

A fourth person was crossing the field and nearing them; a man, yet one wholly unlike themselves. He was an Indian, yet not one like so many of the beggarly, vagabondish, slovenly race to be found in California.

Instead, he instinctively brought the typical Indian of Cooper's works vividly to mind. Tall, erect and muscular, he strode forward as though the power of a Pontiac was his, and even a bitter enemy of his race could but feel that no ordinary mind existed there.

His dress was thoroughly Indian, but the blanket which he wore with kingly dignity was clean and almost new.

As he neared the group he seemed to see that something unusual had occurred, but he came straight to the spot, while the white men stood in silence. He looked past them and saw the still form by the roadside, and then his dark eyes flashed a glance to Philip Warburton's face.

"Ugh! death is here!" he said quickly.

"Yes, chief, and violent death," the overseer replied. "This man has been shot."

"Who shot him?"

The Indian moved nearer the body.

"Wah! it is the ranch-owner you call Hague."

"Yes."

The chief's manner was grave, but he showed no other emotion and his keen eyes were busy.

"It was the work of a coward; he was shot in the back," he then added.

"Again you are right."

"Can you help us in the case?"

Commodore Nick asked the question quietly. He did not love the Indians who lived near, but there was a lofty dignity in Red Jaguar's manner which affected even the ex-mariner.

The chief's gaze wandered to Nettleton's face and then back to the body. He touched the cold forehead and exerted a little strength on one rigid arm.

"Death came many hours ago," he replied.

"What do you know about him?"

"We have reason to believe that he was shot while riding away from Coast Castle, about ten o'clock last night," the commodore answered. "That's all we know."

Red Jaguar looked at the red trail, and then began examining the ground. They fell back and gave him all possible chance, and for several minutes he was busy in and about the road.

While he was thus occupied Paul Nettleton joined the party, but Red Jaguar did not seem to notice him. When the search was concluded, the chief again addressed himself to the commodore.

"There is little to be seen now," he said, "for other horses have passed along the road, cover-

ing the tracks of the dead man's horse, and your feet have destroyed those of the assassin, made when he dragged the body here."

"Can you discover nothing?"

"When the shot was fired, the victim fell to the ground at once. He fell here. His horse, frightened by the shot, sprang to one side. Look near the edge of the road and you can see the half-circle he made before shooting back into the middle of the road."

"But the assassin's footprints. He dragged the body here; did he leave no sign?"

"If he did, it is now gone. Only your own footprints are to be seen. But the assassin may have removed all trace of his own tracks."

"This is most unfortunate."

"What does it matter?" exclaimed Paul Nettleton, impatiently. "Are you all so dull of comprehension as to call this a mystery? Let me name the murderer for you. Who should it be but this Mr. Frazer Hot Heart?"

CHAPTER VI.

FOR MURDER!

EVERY eye turned upon the speaker, and with the more interest because Paul had been in the vicinity so short a time and knew so little about any one who lived there.

The regards of Red Jaguar and Philip Warburton were noticeable for their gravity, and the latter gravely made reply:

"What suggests the Hermit as the murderer? Why should he harm Palmer Hague?"

"Of course you can't be expected to understand," Paul superciliously replied, "but my father will understand. Hot Heart and Hague quarreled last night; the former issued a duel challenge which Hague declined to accept, and the Fire-Eater went away vowing vengeance. He took this road, and went about ten minutes ahead of Hague, and it is clear that he kept his threat."

Paul certainly made a strong case; his startling suggestion could not but have due weight, but Philip Warburton hesitated only a moment before replying:

"I believe the Hermit is really innocent; he is no assassin!"

Paul looked at him superciliously.

"My father will form his own opinion. I will merely remind him that the quarrel was not seen by any of the out-door servants."

Philip Warburton's face flushed. He was well aware that he was only an employee of the commodore, and expected to be regarded as a "servant," but he knew very well that the word had been flung in his face as a deliberate insult.

He remained silent, but Commodore Nick and the field-hand gave their opinions that Paul was right.

Red Jaguar said nothing. He had drawn his blanket closer around his stalwart form, and stood in silence, but his gaze searched each face in turn. Whatever he thought, his face told as little as his tongue.

Word had already been sent to Clifftown to summon the officers, and three of them and a doctor came in a body.

Paul took care to artfully color their opinions at the start, and when they heard of the quarrel between Hot Heart and Hague; the challenge and refusal to fight; Hague's threat to investigate Hot Heart's past, and the Fire-Eater's declaration that he would have satisfaction, it was promptly agreed to arrest the latter.

The party broke up.

One of the officers and the doctor started in a wagon with the body for Clifftown; the commodore and Paul went home; Red Jaguar went his way in silence; and two officers and Warburton started for the old convent.

Reaching it, they found the new door, which the Hermit had inserted, unlocked, and they pushed it open and walked in without ceremony.

The lower floor of the old building was given over to dust and ruins in stone and wood, but the floor and walls were firm, and at the further end something similar to the pulpit of to-day held its old form.

It seemed indeed a strange dwelling-place, but when they ascended the winding stairway, the view was not so bad. The mysterious master of the place used the second floor, which was in one room, as kitchen, parlor and sleeping apartment, but its furniture was meager and, except for one easy-chair, rude in the extreme.

In the easy-chair sat the Hermit, his feet well elevated, his head leaned back, a long pipe in his mouth, and his whole appearance that of a man who feels happy and at peace with the world.

But as his callers appeared he laid down his pipe and politely arose.

"This is an unexpected honor, gentlemen," he said, with a quiet smile. "First visitors I've had at Convent Rest, as I call my eyrie. Sorry I can't set chairs for you—"

"Never mind!" interrupted the leading officer. "We have not come as visitors."

"Ah! on business."

"Yes."

"Pleased to see you in any case; the latch-string is always out."

"We want you to go with us to see Palmer Hague."

Hot Heart struck his fist on the table with great force.

"Excuse me!" he retorted. "The man is a coward, and the only way I will see him is at the muzzle of a revolver. My challenge still holds good."

"You must hate him."

"Nothing of the kind. Hatred is a trivial affair compared to this. Hague called me a scoundrel and liar, and he's got to fight."

"Would you turn a revolver upon him?"

"I will, and shall! He must fight!"

Philip was trying to catch Hot Heart's attention and warn him by a look or gesture, but all in vain.

"When did you see Hague last?" the officer continued.

"Last night, at Nettleton's."

"Did you come straight home after leaving there?"

"Yes; straight as the road runs."

"Did you see Hague follow, or pass you?"

"Not much. When I start Jack Jet, my horse, on the road, nothing ever passes us."

"Mr. Hot Heart, I hear that you carry good weapons. Will you allow me to see them?"

"Of course I will!" and the Fire-Eater at once brought out two fine revolvers and a rifle. All were fully loaded, and had been cleaned since fired last.

"Have you any other fire-arms?"

"No; these are all and enough is a plenty."

The officer thought he had carried the preliminaries far enough, and he now informed the Hermit that Palmer Hague was dead. Hot Heart started back.

"That's confounded bad!" he exclaimed.

"Our duel will never be fought!"

"Haven't you had revenge enough?"

"I've had none at all."

"Mr. Hot Heart, it is believed that you murdered Palmer Hague, that you shot him down last night!"

The Fire-Eater stared in silence at the speaker. If his face correctly expressed what was in his mind he was both surprised and startled. Philip Warburton felt sure that he was looking at an honest man, but the faces of the officers showed that they believed all this a cunning piece of acting.

Suddenly the Fire-Eater drew his muscular form erect, and his eyes sparkled angrily.

"Who accuses me?" he cried.

"The law!"

"Bah! are you afraid to speak the truth?"

"Well, there are plenty of people who will swear that you quarreled with and threatened Hague, though I believe it was Paul Nettleton who just tumbled to your connection with it."

What meant that quick, strange expression which flashed over the Fire-Eater's face? Philip Warburton was as much at a loss to understand it as man could well be. There seemed to be something of doubt, surprise, anger and sorrow in it—an expression so peculiar that the overseer pondered over it often in the days that followed.

One moment thus, and then Frazer Hot Heart was his old, careless self.

"Very kind in you to come here and notify me, sir. Hope it didn't make you any trouble?"

"We are here to arrest you."

"Oh! that's a cat of a different color. So you are going to drag me off to the Bastille? All right; if there's any one thing I'm noted for it's a disposition to oblige. It's a family virtue. My great-grandfather volunteered to be hung in place of a friend condemned as a spy in 1776, and would have suffered thusly only no rope could be found."

All this was said with the lightest, most self-possessed manner possible, but the officers gave little heed to it.

They made a thorough search of the whole place, but made only one discovery of importance. On a shelf they found another revolver, of which one chamber was empty, and the bore black with powder.

"Thought you said you had no other weapon."

"That's not mine," the Hermit replied.

"Whose is it?"

"Give it up. I found it yesterday morning, in the ruins of the main convent building."

The officers were inclined to doubt his statement, but, as Palmer Hague had undoubtedly been shot with a rifle, the revolver was barely of sufficient known importance to warrant its seizure.

Preparations were made for the start to Clifftown, and Hot Heart turned to Philip Warburton.

"My horse, Jack Jet, is in the lean-to back of this building. May I ask you to see that he does not suffer while I am away?"

Philip readily gave the promise, and then the entire party left the strange abode. The door was locked behind them, and then all except Warburton entered the wagon and started for Clifftown.

The overseer looked after them thoughtfully.

"I can't bring myself to believe that man guilty, but circumstantial evidence is certainly strong against him, and I'm afraid it will go hard with him!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE BUSH WOLF.

PHILIP WARBURTON was a young man who had lived at the East until a year before the date of our story. During the ten years following his fourteenth birthday he had been the only support of his widowed, invalid mother, and though he managed after long struggling to earn a fair income for a humble man, her sickness had eaten up all.

When he was twenty-four the mother died. He had the satisfaction of having devoted long years to her, but when the time came that no one had a claim upon him, he turned his face toward the West.

Going to California he secured his present position with Commodore Nettleton, and was filling it with his natural conscientious devotion to duty.

As has been said, the commodore had his land cultivated because it was the proper thing to do, not because he cared whether it brought in money; but observing people said his intelligent faithful overseer would make the property pay largely in a short time.

Such was Philip Warburton, who will now come more prominently before the reader.

He went back to Coast Castle after seeing the Hermit taken away, and the first person he met there was Loyola, the Indian woman.

She was a strange servant for the house, but Commodore Nick did more eccentric things than to employ her. He had found her, report said, on the Mexican coast, some years before, and she had actually made a voyage with him on his vessel. There was a general idea that he owed her some debt of gratitude, but the other employees did not know what.

She was a woman of middle age, and unusually comely for an Indian. Her black hair a remarkably bright, clear color, and, except that it was coarse, might have been valued by a society belle; her features were regular and not as dark as the average Indian's; and though generally silent and unimpressionable, she was intelligent and could, if so inclined, speak good English.

As a rule, however, she indulged in short, broken sentences.

Warburton approached her and said:

"Where are the members of the family, Loyola?"

The woman nodded toward the house.

"In there."

"Do you know what they are doing? Are they busy?"

"Master Paul and the Silent Man have shut themselves up in the east room."

The Silent Man, Philip knew, was Professor Hazlitt.

"And the commodore?"

"With the visitor Don Esteban Villegas."

"So he is here? What does he want?"

"Don't know."

Warburton was not pleased. He did not like Villegas, and it flashed upon him that a visit at this particular time had unusual significance. He had for some time suspected that Don Esteban would be pleased to see Palmer Hague out of the way, so that he could lay siege to Barbara Nettleton's heart, and the overseer wondered if the Mexican was not taking time by the forelock and trying to make capital out of Hague's death.

Loyola went into the house, while Philip sat down on the piazza and waited to see the commodore.

In half an hour the latter came out, attending Don Esteban, who then mounted his horse and rode away toward the south.

He did not even glance at the humble overseer, but it was not this which made Philip look after him with a dissatisfied expression. He did not like Don Esteban, and hoped that Miss Nettleton would not think seriously of him.

This was a purely friendly wish; Philip felt only respect for the young mistress of Coast Castle.

The overseer made his report of the Fire-Eater's arrest, whereupon Commodore Nick replied:

"I reckon they've got the right man."

"Do you really think so?"

"Don't you?"

"Frankly, sir, I do not. Whatever Frazer Hot Heart is, he's not cowardly enough to shoot a man in the back in cold blood."

"But you must remember Hague had threatened to investigate Hot Heart, and had refused to fight a duel. It is only reasonable to suppose that the ruffian was alarmed, and took the quickest way of stopping the investigation."

Philip did not see fit to reply to this stubborn presentation of the case, and the commodore slowly added:

"Besides, Villegas has brought news bearing on the case. He does not believe what Hot Heart charged against Hague, but attributes it to personal spite. He claims that Hot Heart, who must be of low origin, has been paying attention to one of the Don's servants, and when she rebuffed him, he was so violent that Villegas had to drive the fellow away. Here is further reason for Hot Heart's hatred."

Warburton was astonished.

"Commodore Nettleton, do you believe this absurd tale?" he cried.

"My good fellow, I don't want to do any one injustice, and I am not Hot Heart's judge, but Villegas's maid-servant will swear to all this."

"Even women sometimes commit perjury, sir," the overseer could not help retorting.

"Far be it from me to harm Frazer Hot Heart," Commodore Nick gravely added, "though I don't like the man. As for Hague, I believe he had a other wife. Would an innocent man have failed to defend himself at the altar? I'm not the judge of any of them; I leave that to law."

The speaker glanced up at the windows of the east room.

"Shiver my timbers!" he added, "if Coast Castle ain't got to be a mighty queer place. You've seen Professor Hazlitt, Paul's friend, haven't you? Just so! He's a queer messmate for a young man of twenty-seven, I think; queer beyond my comprehension. Look up there! He and Paul are in there, with every curtain down, when it seems that my boy ought to be cheering up his sister. What be they doing that needs such secrecy?"

Dissatisfaction and vexation were in the commodore's voice, but Philip felt the delicacy of the affair and made no reply.

"Everything is w ong, all of a sudden," Commodore Nick added. "Where is Bill Peters? They want to make me believe he's drowned in Nigger Arm, but it won't go down. I know Bill better than that. What I'm afeerd of is foul play."

"It is generally believed he was drowned by the capsizing of his boat."

"Them as thinks so didn't know Bill Peters."

"Who would harm him?"

"There's plenty of such around here—Injuns, Mexicans and half-breeds."

"Had Peters money with him?"

"Not that I know of."

"Nor enemies?"

"No."

"Then I see no object in harming him. Remember, too, that the boat drifted back to Clifftown, wrong side up."

"Couldn't it have been upset purposely and left to drift back? I've heard of such things being done just to cover a crime."

The commodore little suspected how well he had surmised; much less, the identity of the man who had upset the boat.

He did not pause to talk much further, but re-entered the house, and Warburton went about his duties. He did not forget that he had promised to care for Jack Jet, the Fire-Eater's horse, and at noon he started for the old convent.

The horse was kept in what the Hermit called a lean-to, adjoining his strange abode. Really, it had been a little addition to the other building, and was popularly supposed to have been used in the palmy days of the convent for cooking purposes.

When the Fire-Eater took possession he had strengthened this place, added a door, as in the case of the larger building, and used it as a stable for Jack Jet.

He had given Philip the key, and the latter intended to care for the horse faithfully.

On reaching the vicinity he turned the corner of the main building and then suddenly paused. Somebody was at the stable-door ahead of him. There stood a man who had a bent wire thrust into the large key-hole, and was patiently trying to work back the bolt.

Warburton recognized him at a glance.

In the conversation between Paul and Hot Heart at the ruins, the latter had told the former to beware of one Garth Griffith, whom he described as a half-breed who skulked in the bushes and out-of-the-way places like a sneaking wolf, and from this fact was often called "the Bush-Wolf."

This was Garth Griffith, and Philip knew at once why he was there. Garth was supposed to be the biggest thief in California, but nobody had ever been able to prove anything against him. He was wonderfully cunning, and though scores of petty thefts loosely attributed to "the Indians," were supposed to be his own work, he slipped out of every danger with the skill of an eel.

Warburton strode forward, intending to clap his hand upon the half-breed's shoulder, but he had underrated those keen ears.

Garth wheeled like a flash, his bent wire vanished in a sleight-of-hand way, and he stood the picture of innocence, or as near it as his crafty face would allow.

He was a man of medium height, slenderly built, but with well-rounded body and limbs, which indicated unusual strength, all of which served to give him a kind of panther-like look and grace.

His dress was a mixture of American and Mexican style, with no trace of Indianism; but his face, hair and eyes showed his red blood emphatically; in fact, he looked to be three-quarters Indian. His dusky face was beardless, crafty and rather thin; his dark eyes large, nervous and keen; and the long hair which hung over temple and neck was as black and straight as that of a full-blooded red-man.

Such was the person who faced Warburton, trying to seem wholly at his ease.

"What are you about?" cried Philip.

"Nothing, senor."

"Nothing! You were trying to steal the Hermit's horse!"

Garth lifted both hands in an assumption of shocked surprise.

"Senor!" he exclaimed deprecatingly.

"Oh! you needn't deny it. I know you and your way. You are an infernal thief!"

"Senor Warburton, I swear by Saint—"

"What were you doing at that door?"

"I was looking in to see if Hot Heart was there."

"Did you need a wire to look?"

"A wire, senor?" repeated the Bush-Wolf.

"Oh! come, don't think me a fool. You were trying to pick the lock and steal the black horse. I have a good mind to hand you over to the Clifftown authorities."

"Senor, have I ever done you harm?"

"I don't doubt that you would shoot me if it would serve your ends."

"Oh! senor, why will you wrong me so? I am a poor and honest man, and my good name is all I have."

"If so you're the most poverty-stricken wretch in California. Your good name! What is it?—chicken-thief?"

"Ah! you are cruel, senor, cruel!"

The half-breed shook his head and seemed in a very melancholy mood, but his restless eyes wandered around as though he was looking for a hole to dodge through and escape. He held his head erect all at once, and seemed to be looking beyond Warburton.

The latter thought it might be a trick to secure a chance to run away, but the sound of a foot-step caused him to turn also.

He stood face to face with Paul Nettleton.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CRACK OF A RIFLE.

THE new-comer's face bore a scowl, and he looked suspiciously from Warburton to Garth and then back again.

"What's going on here?" he said.

"Ask Mr. Garth Griffith," suggested Philip.

"I asked you, sir!"

It was an imperious, ill-mannered retort, and Philip grew stronger in his opinion that the commodore's son was a very disagreeable fellow, but he quietly replied:

"I found the half-breed trying to steal Hot Heart's horse."

"Senor, you wrong me!" remonstrated Garth.

"What was he doing?" asked Paul, after a pause, during which he considered the situation carefully.

"He was trying to pick the lock of the door."

Paul turned upon the half-breed. He considered him no more than the dirt under their feet, and his sole ambition now was to give him a fright which would forever keep him away from the ruined convent.

"Fellow, do you know who I am?" he blusteringly asked.

"Yes, senor."

Mild and soft was the half-breed's reply.

"Well, hear me speak: You are not wanted around here, and we won't have you here. I don't know where you make your home, but you will now go there and stay. If you come prowling around here any more, I'll have you tied up by the servants of Coast Castle and lashed until you howl."

Garth heard this threat, with his eyes bent on the ground, and his manner was servilely humble, but his gaze was now raised to Paul's face.

"Senor," he said, with his softest utterance, "do not be too hard on a poor and honest man. I may some time be of use to you. I am a great trailer, and skilled in learning things of which other people don't know. Perhaps I might, after a little search, tell you what has happened to your servant, Peters!"

Straight into Paul's face looked the keen black eyes, and the guilty man felt himself grow cold. What meant those words? They might have been simple enough, but from the way the half-breed looked at him, Paul felt sure there was dangerous meaning in every word.

Garth Griffith was a wandering vagabond.

What was more probable than that he had actually seen the crime committed?

Paul dared anger him no further, and he somewhat nervously answered:

"It is true that I may need a man for this service. I spoke hastily, my man, and you can go."

The Bush-Wolf bowed and went at once. With long, light steps he moved away across the field, his movements as graceful and lithe as those of a panther.

Warburton looked after him with dissatisfaction; Paul, with fear he found it hard to conceal. After a brief pause, he turned to the overseer again.

"Are you a friend of the Fire-Eater?"

"No."

"Then why the blazes are you in charge of his tumble-down old rookery?"

The words were not more offensive than Paul's

manner, but the overseer's outward composure seemed proof against everything.

"I am not in charge of it, Mr. Nettleton. The officers took the key away with them, and only they can enter, I suppose. Hot Heart did ask me to see that his horse did not suffer, and I agreed to take care of it—"

"If he is not your friend, what claim had he upon you?"

"None. I was about to say that I agreed because I would not see the horse suffer."

"Well, I don't think my father would like to have his hired men working for others."

"I don't think Commodore Nettleton will object to having the horse properly fed and watered."

"Perhaps not, but it would be well for you to remember who you work for."

With this parting, malicious remark Paul turned and walked rapidly away. Philip looked after him frowningly, and then suddenly smiled.

"I won't let his insolence trouble me, though a sound thrashing would do him good and curb his tongue a trifle. He is but little like his father, and it would not be strange if he got into trouble by carrying such a high hand. Possibly, too, he may find me in his way if he continues to insult me. I am not sure but I could overturn one of his most cherished plans."

Warburton went to care for the horse, while Paul, looking back as he went homeward, saw Garth Griffith disappear in the bushes at the top of the hill like a veritable wolf.

The younger man shivered.

"I'm afraid of that fellow. What did he mean by the reference to Bill Peters? It may have been only chance, yet his look was as significant as his words. Can it be he spied upon me that night? He may have seen all. May the fiend take the luck! am I always to be in fear and trouble over that miserable affair?"

Paul went home, still thinking of Garth, and then shut himself up in the room with Professor Hazlitt. As before, the curtains were kept down, and no other eyes saw what was done there; but when, after some hours, Commodore Nick went up in towering wrath over this prolonged absence, and found the door locked, he drove his heavy boot against it with force which almost dashed it from its hinges.

It was promptly opened by Paul.

The professor sat at a table and there was nothing to betray their late occupation, though Paul looked flurried.

The commodore stared at him grimly.

"What is wanted, father?"

"I'll tell ye what's wanted. I want to know what the red-hot, roaring blazes is going on in this house anyway! Confound it, here's the ship in a gale that bends the sticks so that the foremast and mizzenmast knock noses, and one of the crew in his cabin, blocked up. Zounds, sir, are you aware of the fact that the women need cheering?"

"Why, sir, they seem cheerful now."

"Cheerful! Be you blind? Can't you tell that it's all put on? Hang it, sir, no true sailor ever goes below in a gale. Now I'd like to know what mighty important business you two are transacting here."

Professor Hazlitt arose and politely said:

"Pardon me, commodore, but do not blame your son. I am deep in my studies, and he was helping me."

"What studies?" demanded the impetuous mariner. "Where be your school-books? Trot 'em out and let me look. If there is any 'isms,' or conundrums to be solved here, I want a back at 'em. Where's your school-books?"

He stood in the door as grim and determined as Neptune himself, and Paul was glad that the professor saw fit to take the burden of conversation from his shoulders.

"We are using no books, but discussing, from previous readings, the various theories as to who discovered America. I side with Pliny that it was the Carthaginians, while Paul hovers between the Phoenicians and the well-known theory of Seneca and Aristotle."

"Neptune and Mars! has my house got mixed up with a lunatic asylum? I don't know anything about your Pernicians, nor What-d'ye-call-'ems, and I won't mix in. Not by a blamed sight! I always had an idee that old Chris Columbus found this lump of s'ile—I've certainly heerd so—but maybe my arithmetic was wrong. You needn't explain no more; I've heerd enough, and I'll cast off grappling-irons and set sail. Paul, when I kicked the door so obstreperously, 'twas in my mind to say no door should be locked in my house; but if you're trying to hunt up America and Pernicians, I swear I'll feel easier with the key turned. Professor, excuse me if I have slipped up in my grammar; I do blunder sometimes when I git too much excited. Ef you can git away from the Pernicians, you'll find the table spread at the usual hour."

And away rattled the commodore, unheeding Paul's invitation to remain.

"There ain't room for me and the Pernicians there," he grumbled, as he went down-stairs. "I do hope they'll find America, but ef the boy was to stir his stumps and find Bill Peters first, I'd admire him more. Poor Bill! I begin to feel a trifle worried about him."

In the mean while Philip Warburton had finished caring for Jack Jet and left the stable.

When he came out the half-breed had disappeared, but the knowledge that it would be easy for him to hover near and renew his efforts as soon as the coast was clear, led Philip to take a turn through the bushes at the top of the hill.

He did not find him there.

Having made due search, he was about to set out for Coast Castle when, standing on the hill, he saw something of interest away to the east.

Here was a nearly level field, which formed a slight depression of twenty acres, or such a matter, between hills, and were sparsely timbered throughout. In spots, however, there were glades from forty to a hundred feet square, and in few places did trees and underbrush grow so thickly as to keep down the grass.

Standing on the ridge Philip had a good view of this depression, which was called Shaker's Timber; and two moving objects attracted his attention at the same time. They were men, and though moving from entirely different points, bade fair to meet at a common point.

One of them was Garth Griffith.

The other Philip scrutinized longer, but in the end he believed that he recognized him.

It was Don Esteban Villegas.

A wave of suspicion rolled over Warburton.

Was it by chance these men were about to meet?

He liked neither of them, and it was a fact that while Garth had tried to steal Frazer Hot Heart's horse, the Mexican had been to Coast Castle and told a tale about the Fire-Eater which Warburton believed to be wholly false.

Suddenly a desire seized him to know about the approaching interview, and without stopping to consider on the subject, he ran down the hill and, keeping some sort of underbrush continually between him and the other men, hastened toward the point where they were likely to meet.

Really, there was little danger of discovery, as he learned when he neared that point.

Once on the flat he had lost sight of the two men, and when he looked for them he failed to find anything.

Could it be they had gone straight on their respective ways?

Warburton wished to know, and he continued the search as well as possible, regretting that he was not a trailer, and able to find them by such means.

But he eventually woke up somebody, for a bullet suddenly whistled spitefully past his ear, and out on the air rung the sharp crack of a rifle. His head had been missed by two inches!

CHAPTER IX.

THE HALF-BREED'S TRICK.

WHEN Garth Griffith left the ruined convent he made good use of the permission to retreat and was soon in the bushes. Here he was at home. Probably he had never slept in a building more imposing than a shanty six feet square, and the ground was usually his bed.

The bushes were as much his home as that of the wolf, and like that animal he seldom went out except on a marauding expedition. He had very likely made his entrance to the world in the bushes, and had certainly been reared there. He clung to the bushes in maturer life; had no regular associate, and only joined hands with others to gain strength in crime by union; and lived by the fruit of plunder.

In fact, he might have been a wolf, himself, had not some accident made him a man.

His life was not a grade above that of a wolf, and his cunning may have been a union of human intellect with wolf instinct.

With his light, noiseless step he went straight across Shaker's Timber until he reached a certain tree. There he paused and looked sharply around.

"Not yet come," he muttered.

A leaf rustled.

Garth Griffith wheeled like a flash, his hand falling on his revolver, but smiled and dropped his hand as Don Esteban Villegas stepped out of the thicket.

"I'm ahead of you, Garth," said the Mexican, quietly.

The half-breed glanced at the sun.

"I am not late."

"True, and I have only just come. But let us plunge into business. You say you have a secret to reveal to me."

"To sell, senor."

"Caramba! I never thought you'd tell it for gratitude. It isn't your way, good Garth. Well, how am I to know it is of a nature to reward me for buying? You say that it concerns the Nettletons, but—"

"Yes, senor, and you want to get the Nettletons under your thumb—so!—and this will help you. When you are the husband of Barbara Nettleton, you will be glad you bought my secret."

"Upon my word! you are a bold rascal and a crafty one," said Don Esteban somewhat sharply.

"Why should we waste words, senor? You

know me, and that I will be faithful. I have no love for these Americans, except for their money. Give me twenty-five dollars of that, and I will help you to marry the girl."

Villegas looked fixedly at the half-breed for a moment, and then counted out the desired amount in gold.

"Now let me hear your story," he said.

Garth stowed the money carefully away.

"Senor, you have been often to Coast Castle. Have you heard of a missing man supposed to be drowned in the black waters of Nigger Arm?"

"Yes; Paul Nettleton's servant."

The half-breed chinked the money in his pocket.

"Don Esteban, I am often abroad at night."

"Yes."

"The servant disappeared at night."

"Ha! Go on, Garth."

"On the night that he disappeared I walked along the shore, passing by the head of Nigger Arm. When I got there I saw an unusual sight. A sail-boat lay rocking at the water's edge, secured by the painter."

"I'll warrant that your fingers itche!"

"They did, senor, and I determined to have the boat myself, as whoever left her there had been very careless. I went down the rocks, but had not lain a hand on the boat when I heard another man descending. I dodged into a gap in the rocks, and waited until he appeared."

"Who was it?"

"Hear me through, senor. The man threw some heavy object into the boat; what it was I could not tell; and then pushed the craft away from shore. She drifted idly until she caught the wind, and then went scudding away before it merrily."

"The man managed her well, and I was about to go on my way, when he suddenly and deliberately threw her around so that the wind flipped her over in a twinkling."

"Deliberately?"

"So I said, senor."

"Are you sure?"

"I'll swear to it."

"And who was the navigator?"

"Have patience, Don Esteban. Once the boat was capsized the man left her, swam ashore, went part way up the rocks, took off all his clothes, put on a fresh suit he had concealed, hid the first suit and then went away."

"His name, I say."

"Master Paul Nettleton!"

"By St. Catherine! that is strange. This, you say, was on the night that the boat hired by the servant, Bill Peters, drifted back to Cliff-town, wrong side up?"

"Yes, senor."

"What sort of a boat was the one you saw at Nigger Arm? Was it large or small?"

"Senor, it was small, and, moreover, no strange craft to me. I recognized it as being Jeffrey's, and I now know it was the same one the man Peters hired."

"Yet you saw it safely moored at this end of Nigger Arm, and then saw Paul deliberately capsize it?"

"Yes."

"Did you follow him after he changed suits?"

"No. I changed suits, also."

"Stole the one he last concealed?"

"Yes."

Once more the half-breed looked sharply around, just as his cousin, the wolf, would do if in a similar place, and then went to a thicket, disappeared, was gone a moment and then came out bearing a bundle. This he unrolled, and a man's sack coat was revealed.

He held up one sleeve and tersely said:

"Look!"

Villegas obeyed, and his eyes were sharp enough so that he needed no further directions. On the sleeve was an irregular dark spot, and though the whole garment was discolored slightly by water, he knew that this darker spot was blood which had been exposed to water, probably when fresh.

"And this is the coat you saw Paul Nettleton take off that night?"

"Yes, senor."

"Where is the rest of the suit?"

"Elsewhere, in the wood. This was the only blood-stain. I dared not have this coat near me, so I hid it here; and that was why I insisted on your meeting me here, senor."

"Can it be that Paul killed his servant?"

"I have told what I know, Don Esteban."

"All?"

"All, senor."

"But why should Paul kill him?"

"Who knows? Not I."

There was a moment's silence, and then Garth added:

"Was not this news worth the money you paid?"

"Caramba! yes. By means of it—but never mind!"

The half-breed smiled. He understood about what was in Villegas's mind, and had clearly outlined the situation at the beginning of the interview. The Mexican desired Barbara for his wife, but he knew he stood no chance unless he could bring extraordinary pressure to bear upon her.

His sky was looking particularly clear, however, and all through unexpected aid. Garth Griffith's revelation was important, and another secret had come into his possession which was even more important. Between them, he believed that he would be able to win his matrimonial game.

As Garth was not to be taken into his confidence in this case, and he wanted opportunity to think, he did not spend much more time with the half-breed; but, assuring him that he would see him again, left the place and walked away toward the south.

Garth replaced the blood-stained coat, shouldered his rifle and moved away; but only a few yards had he gone when he caught sight of Philip Warburton.

The latter, in pursuing his search for the two men, chanced at that moment to be walking away from the scene of the late interview. Instantly it flashed into the half-breed's mind that their talk had been overheard, and that the listener was now in retreat.

Startled by the idea, Garth acted with precipitation most strange to his usually crafty nature.

Throwing up his rifle, he took quick aim at the overseer.

Just as his finger touched the trigger he remembered that nothing had been said to compromise himself. He tried to withhold the shot. He was too late; the pressure was already made; but the effort so swerved the weapon that his aim was spoiled and Warburton's life saved.

The moment the shot was fired Garth realized his blunder, and saw that there was little hope of concealing his identity. Warburton would surely discover him, and then the citizens of Cliff-town would be delighted to suspend Griffith, the half-breed, from a limb.

He decided that his only safety lay in finishing the work he had so rashly begun.

His usual cunning now showed itself. He knew Warburton would be on his guard, and desired to shoot him without running any risk in return; and this is the way he took to do it. With one sweep he sent his empty rifle whirling as far away as he could throw it, into the tall grass; and then he ran sideways toward Warburton, firing his revolver twice in the opposite direction as he went.

This was to give the impression that foes were there; and he hoped Philip would fall into the trap, be off his guard, allow the half-breed to explain that the rifle-shot was meant for himself, not for Philip; and then when he saw a chance to fire ahead of the overseer, he would put him off the scene forever with one well-aimed shot.

Well conceived was the plan, and Garth, still running sideways and pretending to look back, saw by glancing forward that Warburton had not raised a weapon.

The trap bade fair to catch the overseer.

But the scene suddenly changed. The young man stood motionless until Garth was quite near at hand, and then his right arm came up like a flash and a huge revolver covered the man-wolf's precious body.

Warburton's voice rung out sharply:

"Halt!"

Garth had an unpleasant thrill. Matters were not working as he had hoped; the wrong man held the bead. But his self-possession stood by him as usual, and he made a pretense of turning in surprise.

"Ha! is it you, Senor Warburton? I am glad to see you. Keep your eyes open, for there is danger in the timber."

"I believe you," Philip grimly replied. "So you tried to shoot me, you infernal scoundrel!"

Garth made a start to throw up both hands with his old gesture of innocence and surprise, but one of them held a revolver and Philip was not to be caught thus.

"Keep your hands down!" he cried. "Don't you dare to turn that weapon on me, or you are a dead man!"

"Oh! senor, why will you wrong me?" reproachfully asked the Bush-Wolf. "There is no evil in my heart, and we should be friends. There are outlaws in the timber, and one of them fired a rifle at me."

"I dare swear the ball came nearer my head than yours. I don't believe your little romance about the outlaws, and do think you tried to shoot me."

"Senor, I swear by—"

"Swear by nothing. I wouldn't believe you, anyway. Your ways are well known to me, though why you should shoot me I don't know. Wasn't it settled that no more should be said about the horse-stealing?"

Garth breathed freer. He could read well enough to feel sure that Warburton spoke with sincerity, and he was now as anxious to avoid a fight as he had before been to do murder.

"Senor, you are very kind and I am grateful. If you are ever in need of help come to me, and in my humble way I will serve you faithfully. My heart is not bad."

CHAPTER X.

AN IMPERIOUS WOMAN IN THE SADDLE.

WARBURTON smiled sarcastically. He knew this soft-spoken, fawning fellow was as little to

be trusted as a snake, and that he was of a species that would sting without warning.

He did not, however, see fit to have further words with him. If the Bush-Wolf was given to understand that he was believed guilty of other plots than trying to steal Jack Jet, and in danger of being arrested through the overseer's efforts, he would not rest until he had added murder to his other crimes.

And like his cousin, the four-legged wolf, he would sneak around in the bushes to accomplish his end, and there would be no sound until his rifle had done the work.

Warburton there and then resolved to watch his chance and put an end to this scoundrel's prowling among the bushes, but until he could do so it would be well to avoid trouble. Once arrested, he must be held.

"I haven't any faith in you, or your noble heart," he replied, to the last assertion of his companion, "but we can gain nothing by quarreling. Suppose we go our respective ways and have no more words?"

"It is best, and my enemies seem to have retreated. I gave them a hot fire from my revolver, and it evidently had good effect on them."

"Probably they have run so fast that they're miles away now. Well, farewell, Garth, and may your patron saint use you as well as you deserve."

"Adieu, senior, and remember that if you need help you will find a true friend in me. I am a poor and humble man, but I am honest. Adieu, senior!"

And then they separated, Garth glided away with his light, noiseless step and willowy grace, and the bushes received him in their arms as part and parcel of themselves. Warburton strode away toward Coast Castle with the firm step of an honest man.

He was uncertain what had become of Don Esteban, or whether he had been with Garth, but all chance of overhearing a private conference was gone.

The overseer returned to the top of the hill, and there saw a horseman riding along the road his face toward Clifftown.

It was Paul Nettleton.

Philip wondered if the young man was merely out for a ride, and this question must now be answered in full.

Paul had heard that a revolver had been found in the Fire-Eater's room which he claimed was not his; that he had said he found it in the ruins the morning after the opening of our story; that one chamber was vacant; and the casual description of this weapon alarmed young Nettleton.

He suspected that the weapon was his; the one he had lost after shooting Bill Peters.

This suspicion had started him toward Clifftown, and he went prepared to make fresh trouble for Frazer Hot Heart if it proved to be true.

His fear of the man had led him, as already stated, to plot for his arrest on charge of killing Palmer Hague, but he was now impatient of the law's delay.

"There is no knowing what he may tell while under arrest, and though I have partially spiked his guns, I want to keep his tongue still. If the revolver proves to be mine it will be confirmation of my fear that he knows, or suspects, the truth, and more vigorous measures must be resorted to."

He rode on in deep thought, but suddenly started, brightened, and smote himself on the thigh.

"The very thing, by Jove!" he cried.

An infamous scheme had occurred to him.

He knew the temper of the people of Clifftown and how easy it was to stir them to rash deeds. If they could be so set against Hot Heart that the lynching-spirit would sway them for a time, the dreaded Fire-Eater would forever disappear from the scene.

Full of this plot, Paul rode on to Clifftown.

As the son of rich Commodore Nettleton he commanded all the respect and attention the bluff, hearty Westerners would yield to any one, and once there no obstacles were placed in his way.

Quite the contrary, and when he said that, among other things, he had come as a representative of the family to see how the Hague case was progressing, all the known facts were placed before him.

He was shown the revolver.

As he had feared, it was his own; the very weapon from which had sped the bullet which laid Bill Peters low.

From that moment Paul bent all his energies to the accomplishment of his purpose. Frazer Hot Heart was too dangerous to live; if he escaped the gallows he might send Paul there, and it was a race where the latter did not desire to win.

He went deliberately to work to excite the mob spirit against the prisoner.

A man had been shot in cold blood; he had been a rich, honored member of Clifftown society, and had almost married an honored lady. There had been charges against him, but they were not proven. Probably they could not be proven; very likely it was all a plot of the man who had murdered him.

Who was this man?

A person who had come to the neighborhood from nobody knew where, and had taken up his abode in a tumble-down old ruin, living like a dog in a kennel; a wild, reckless fellow who had quarreled with everybody he met, and shown himself a ruffian.

He had put the finishing touch to his career by doing murder, and would undoubtedly have killed more men had not the walls of the jail closed upon him.

Was such a man a safe inhabitant?

Was any one safe from his red hand?

Was Clifftown to be terrorized by such a ruffian?

Perhaps he would break jail at any moment and "run amuck," killing whoever he could get hold of at sight.

Paul preached this doctrine strongly, yet secretly; first in the jail to the officials, and then outside to the people; and when the approach of twilight showed him that he must return to Coast Castle, he had his hearers properly stirred up.

He rode home with a satisfied smile on his face. He had not once counseled violence, nor hinted at such a thing, but he felt that Frazer Hot Heart would be a lucky man if he lived to see another sun rise.

Neither his face nor manner showed what was in his mind when he met the family at supper, and he replied laughingly when Commodore Nick grimly asked if the "Pernicians" had yet discovered America.

Barbara Nettleton was as calm and gracious as ever during the evening, and every one was forced to the opinion that she had never cared for Palmer Hague.

Her manner was not light or frivolous, and no one could accuse her of heartless or improper conduct just after the tragedy, but she showed no sorrow and probably felt none so far as the loss of a husband was concerned.

Commodore Nick often fell into periods of deep thought, during which he rubbed his chin unmercifully. Like every one else, he was wrestling with a conundrum.

If Barbara had not loved Hague, why had she agreed to marry him?

It was nearly nine o'clock when Barbara, passing alone through the house, was intercepted by Rosa Strong, her maid.

"If you please, Miss Barbara, can I speak with you?"

"Certainly, Rosa. What is it?"

"Timothy has just come from Clifftown, and he says things are in a terrible state there."

"What do you mean?"

Rosa glanced nervously around.

"He thinks they're going to lynch Hot Heart!"

"What?"

Miss Nettleton had started violently.

"He says the men are all about in groups, talking about the Fire-Eater, and they are very bitter against him. Everybody is making threats, and Timothy thinks that they will surely hang him."

Miss Nettleton stood looking at her maid in silence for a moment, her rich, red lips parted, her eyes glowing like animated velvet. Rosa afterward said that her mistress's face was no clew to her thoughts, but that "there was that in it which did just make me feel as though the world was standing still."

"Send Timothy here!"

Barbara spoke decisively, and Rosa skurried away and hunted up the Irish coachman. He came, and confirmed all that Rosa had stated.

"Saddle two horses—one for me and the other for you—and bring them to the rear door at once!" then ordered Miss Nettleton.

Never before had his mistress addressed him so imperiously, and Timothy felt confused and helpless as he hurried away. He prepared the horses like one in a dream and brought them to the designated point, and then Miss Nettleton emerged from the house, clad in a riding-suit, and quickly sprung to the saddle.

This done, she turned to open-mouthed Timothy.

"Mount!"

Like one in a dream, he obeyed.

"Follow me!"

Down the driveway rode the imperious beauty, and Timothy came after. His mind was all in a fog, and he dared ask no questions. Never before had Barbara been in such a mood since he came to Coast Castle, and he felt that it was well for him to remember his place.

Where they were going he did not know. He had a dim suspicion, but did not want to believe it.

When they reached the public road she turned to the left, glanced back at the house, walked a little further as though to make sure that no one would hear her departure, and then suddenly put her horse to a gallop.

Away went mistress and man toward the south.

"She's goin' to Clifftown, sure as mud is mud," thought Timothy, with an inward groan. "She's goin' to see the lynchers an' Frazer Hot Heart!"

And he had so strong a sensation that his hair was rising on end, that he put his hand to his

hat to keep it from being pushed from his head.

Away went Barbara Nettleton, sitting in the saddle like the queen of an English fox-hunt, her graceful figure seeming like a part of the horse she rode, and her face ever turned toward Clifftown.

What would be the end of this mad adventure?

CHAPTER XI.

THE IRON GRASP OF A FAIR HAND.

TIMOTHY WELCH had never felt himself more unhappily placed than on this occasion, and he felt sure that something terrible would follow their arrival at Clifftown. He was naturally as brave as any man, but this freak of his mistress's had placed both her and him at a disadvantage.

"Howly Pater!" he muttered, under his breath, "why didn't she take Commodore Nick, or her brother, instead ave me? Why didn't she— But phat's dhe use ave thryin' to understand a woman? Begorra, they're more uncertain than a thermometer. It's a terrible fix she'll putt us in, but dhe honor ave dhe family depinds on us two, and Oi'll foight till dhe arrum ave me is palsied, begorra!"

And then Timothy straightened himself and rode like an old-time knight going to battle.

Miss Nettleton pressed her horse to a hard gallop, and they rattled over the road at a pace truly "break-neck" of character.

Around the curving road they went, past Razor-Back Ridge, and then Clifftown was not far away.

At first sight everything there seemed as usual, and lights twinkled from the various houses peacefully, but Miss Nettleton was not long of this opinion. There was unusual excitement in the village, and her face changed color as she heard a subdued sound like the mingling of many voices.

It came from the direction of the jail, and for the first time she brought her whip down sharply on her spited horse.

He gave a bound, and then shot forward like an arrow.

At that moment half Clifftown was collected around a sort of platform made of dry-goods cases, which were piled up under a tree. Upon the topmost box stood Frazer Hot Heart, hands and feet bound, and a rope extended from his neck to a limb of the tree. At the other end of the rope were men who were ready to pull, and obey Judge Lynch's order, but the prisoner had the privilege of making a speech before he was disposed of so summarily.

He improved the chance in his usual cool manner.

"I won't detain you long, gentlemen, for you'll want to have a social smoke after the event before going to bed, and it's ten o'clock already. As I told you in the jail, I'm innocent. I never raised a hand against Hague. I would have fought him like a man, but may my hand wither before I shoot any one in the back like a coward."

"I have enough money to bury me and put up a stone. Pray do this, and mark on it the one word, 'Frazer.' As for my horse, Jack Jet, I bequeath him to Philip Warburton. If the real murderer should be found, don't blame yourselves for to-night's work. I don't blame you; it's a trivial affair, so forget it. Are you ready with the rope?"

Two-score voices shouted one word:

"Yes."

"Then you may pull as soon as—"

There was a shout and a yell of alarm.

The crowd surged to and fro.

Then it parted in haste and fear, as well it might, for through the middle came a horse with flashing eyes and grandly swelling nostrils—with great bounds which would have dashed the lynchers to death under his hoofs, had they not wisely given way.

And then from his back leaped a tall, graceful woman. She gained the extemporaneous gallows with a few quick movements, and stood beside the prisoner.

Another moment and a knife flashed in the air a few times and the prisoner stood as free from bonds as she.

By that time the lynchers awoke partially from their stupefaction, but still stared in amazement at the strange and unexpected scene.

There stood Barbara, daughter of Commodore Nettleton, beside Frazer Hot Heart, the red-handed slayer of her lover, and the lynchers had no words with which to express their feelings.

But Miss Nettleton had.

The men saw two revolvers turned upon them held unwaveringly in her slender hands, and then her voice rung out clearly on the air:

"Assassins and cowards! you are in fine work to-night. No wonder you shrink away, for you have cause for shame. Let the feeling continue, for I swear that if any man raises his hand in violence here, I will shoot him as I would a craven wolf!"

"Yes, begorra, an' Oi'll hammer his head till his feet turn blue!"

It was the voice of Timothy Welch. There was not room for him on the upper box, nor had

he a weapon; but he had ascended as high as possible and stood there rolling up his sleeves.

But one of the lynchers retained his coolness and purpose enough to say, angrily:

"Miss Nettleton, are you mad?"

"Mad?" she echoed, derisively. "That is a fine question for a madman to ask."

"Do you want the murderer to escape?"

"Nobody is going to escape. Frazer Hot Heart is my prisoner now, and, if necessary, I will march him back to jail at the revolver's muzzle. But you who would have doomed him without trial—oh! cowards, are you not ashamed!"

"You needn't fly so high: 'twas your lover whom he killed," said an insolent voice from the crowd.

But Miss Nettleton seemed beautifully unconscious of it.

"Every person is innocent to true men until proved guilty," she added, "and it is nothing short of murder to hang one who has not been tried. You are many men and I only a woman, but you interfere here at peril of your lives. Keep back, or I fire!"

Hot-Heart had remained perfectly calm, but he now held out one hand and addressed the mob himself.

"Gents, keep cool," he said, quickly. "'Tis the duty of every man to obey when Beauty commands, and if I were you I would really postpone the hanging for to-night. I, for one, am in no hurry. It's a trivial affair, and I can meet you any time again that you wish."

"There will be no more done in the case except by the legal authorities," declared Miss Nettleton.

"But the boys will be disappointed," urged Hot Heart.

"No we won't!" shouted one of the most ruffianly-looking of the crowd. "The job shall be done now!"

He sprang upon the pile of boxes as he spoke, leaping toward the Fire-Eater, and a huge knife glittered in his hand as the lamp-light fell on the group.

"Stop!"

The man obeyed, and well he might. A revolver had been thrust almost into his face, and the hand which held it was as unwavering as the voice which sounded the terse command. And it was Barbara who acted and spoke; while her face was as stern, menacing and beautiful as that of an old-time heroine.

It was an impressive scene, and the spectators hardly breathed, but the spell was soon broken.

The ruffian's knees began to quake, and he wheeled, sprang from the box and plunged into the crowd.

An unexpected cheer arose from the crowd. Those who had been undecided before, now settled their position in earnest, and that, too, with scarcely a thought of Frazer Hot Heart.

Barbara Nettleton had conquered them all.

They were men who could appreciate heroism in all forms, and when it came in the form of a beautiful woman, they could resist no more than if the mighty Pacific had been rolling over them.

"Give her her own way, say I!" shouted a loud voice from the crowd. "She's right and we're wrong, and I'm ready to fight the man who would molest the Fire-Eater now. His place is in jail, in the hands of the law."

Another cheer.

Hot Heart turned quickly to Barbara:

"The day is yours, and though I talk folly at times, let me say one thing now with all my heart—you have saved my life and I am grateful. God bless you!"

She looked him full in the face.

"Have I saved a man innocent or guilty?"

"Innocent! I swear to you!"

"I believe you. I could almost give you my hand were it not for appearances."

Was it proud Miss Nettleton who spoke the last sentence? It was said on the impulse of the moment, and at the end she grew confused, flushed and turned quickly away. She regretted a remark she had made almost unconsciously; her thoughts, not her judgment had spoken.

Several of the best men of Clifftown came to the front, and under their escort, Hot Heart was taken back to jail.

They promised Miss Nettleton that no more violence should occur, and she knew she could trust them. Then she was anxious to reach home. Timothy brought the horses and they started, but their pace was slow, and Barbara rode with downcast eyes and drooping head.

She was no longer the imperious queen, and a flush of shame dyed her lovely cheeks.

"What will people say of me? I shall be the talk of the county, and shall dare face no one. Oh! why didn't I ask Paul to come with me?"

Occupied with thoughts like these she rode with drooping head until the clatter of hoofs in front caused her to look up. A horseman came speeding down the road at a mad gallop.

She recognized Paul; he reined in his horse by her side so suddenly that he almost lost his seat.

"Where have you been?"

It was a shout on his part, and so filled with

anger, reproof and even more, that the high spirit of the shrinking girl flashed to her aid. She looked her brother steadily in the face, and as steadily replied:

"To Clifftown."

"Why did you go?"

"To save a human life from a mob."

Paul hissed forth an oath.

"Have you interfered in Hot Heart's behalf?"

"Yes, I have."

"Miserable girl! Have you no shame? Do you forget that you are a woman? Great heavens! what has the Nettleton family come to, that one of them has become so lost to all sense of honor?"

"Sir!"

"You heard my words?"

"I did, sir," Miss Nettleton replied, in a calm, clear voice, "and were you not my brother, I would lay my whip across your face with all the strength of my arm!"

CHAPTER XII.

RED JAGUAR.

PAUL NETTLETON had aroused a whirlwind, but not yet was he wise enough to know it.

He was mad with wrath that after all his labor to incite the mob against Hot Heart his own sister should thus ruin his elaborate plot, and he was playing the bully as he had done when an ill-mannered boy at home.

Barbara started her horse at her last words and would have rode on, but he seized her horse's rein.

"Wait!" he cried, viciously. "I want you to know what you have done. You, a woman, have mixed with a mob to save a vile murderer, and the whole country will ring with your name and fame—a proud fame, truly!"

"No honest man will speak ill of me; no coward shall!"

"You'll find that all will speak. How dared you bring disgrace on your family?"

"I have not."

"I say you have."

"Well, I am my own mistress."

"You would not long be so if a mad-house were near."

"That will do, Paul Nettleton. You have shown your nature plainly, to-night, and the man who turns against his own sister without cause is a scoundrel. Were you an honorable man you would defend, not condemn me. I am glad to know you as you are. From this day we are on speaking terms, and no more. Release my horse!"

Calm and quiet was her speech, every word going incisively home like pointed steel, but, under the calm exterior was a vein of contempt which angered Paul anew.

In answer to her last direction he snarled:

"Not until I free my mind—"

"Let go that rein!"

The words shot from her lips impetuously, fiercely, and her riding-whip was raised over his head.

His hand fell away. Fighter of jaguars and pumas he might be, but that command appealed to a new feeling within him. His brute courage was untouched, but his small, ignoble mind had yielded to a stronger, loftier one.

Another moment and he was alone in the road.

Barbara had started away, and after her went honest Tim Welch. A very mad man was Tim.

"Be the powers," he was thinking, "O! wish the mistress had seen fit to ask me to settle the quarrel. Oh! wouldn't O! jest like to hammer that onnannerly life ave the worruld into mince-m'ate? Begorra, is it a Nettleton he is? Then, by the powers, it's meself is thinking that the rest ave the family must have been changed in their cradles. The low-lived blackguard!"

The honest Irishman looked back at the slowly following young man.

"Oh! wouldn't O! like to hould on a bit an' give him a few licks for luck!"

Tim did nothing of the kind, but attended Barbara faithfully home. Before she entered the house she thanked him in her kindest manner for his attendance, and Tim would have died for her, if necessary, after that.

The hour was so late that Commodore Nettleton had retired in blissful ignorance of what was transpiring at the village, but it was long before Barbara slept.

She felt that she had made a mistake in going to Clifftown without a companion of her own station in life, but this only served to make her feel more bitter against Paul.

He had turned against her in what seemed a base way, and it was far from her nature to forgive such a thing. Paul had never been a kind brother. Five years her senior, he had been a tyrant before he went to travel, and he seemed even worse now.

Finding that she continued excited and feverish, she finally opened the window and stepped out on the piazza.

As she did so, she saw that a light was still burning in the east room.

It was not a sleeping apartment, but that in which Paul and Professor Hazlitt had for some days been holding their mysterious, secret interviews.

And there they were now, no doubt, though it was nearly one o'clock.

Previously Barbara had given but little attention to her father's grumbling, and curiosity, about their secret sessions, but her own curiosity was at last aroused.

What was the meaning of these prolonged interviews with lowered curtains and locked doors?

She had noticed that, outside the secret room, Paul paid but little attention to the taciturn professor. Clearly, they were engaged in some work of importance, despite Paul's assertion that it was trivial in one sense of the word, and she felt that it was not right to keep every one else in the dark.

Her father, at least, ought to be made a confidant.

She watched the curtained window for some time, and then went back into the house. As she secured her window, she remembered the care taken every night by Paul to see that the whole house was properly fastened.

What did it mean?

It was absurd to suppose that he was actuated by personal fear, after all his experience in the wild woods of Mexico and Central America.

She remembered the commodore's suggestion that Paul might have brought home a lot of diamonds, but in that case Professor Hazlitt would have been of no use. She had already tested his knowledge of gems, and found that he knew nothing about them.

The object of their persistent labor behind closed doors remained a mystery.

Shortly after Barbara retired to the house there was another sign of life about the place. One of the rear doors was unlocked, and after some reconnoitering, the person with the key came out, secured the door behind her, and glided softly away in the darkness.

It was Loyola, the Indian woman.

She moved quickly toward the east, and did not pause until she reached the sparse growth of bushes and small trees that covered the ridge before mentioned—the border of Shaker's Timber.

She had evidently directed her steps toward a designated point, for there she stopped and looked about as though in search of some one.

She did not have to wait. The bushes opened and a man came over with a light, yet strong and dignified step. It was Red Jaguar, the Indian chief, and his tall, powerful figure had never looked more impressive.

"Welcome, daughter!" he said, in his peculiarly musical, sonorous voice.

In marked contrast came her guttural, thoroughly-Indian accents in reply:

"Have you waited long, Great Chief?"

"No; and if I had, it would not matter. Never run any risk to see me, for the white people must not suspect you. I have waited long, and can still wait. What are months and years in a cause like ours? Is there news?"

"No, Great Chief."

"A light still burns in the house. Who is there?"

"My master's son and the Silent Man."

"Still striving to master the secret?"

"Yes."

"I like not that little old man. He is learned and shrewd, and the secret may be theirs before we find opportunity to deprive them of their unlawful possession."

"Is it not dangerous to wait?"

"Yes; but what can we do? It must vanish like the morning dew when we strike, and leave no trace behind. Probably I might secure it any time by force, but this is far from my purpose. We must be patient. There is danger that they may at any time discover the secret, but, wise as the Silent Man is, I believe even he will have to work long. Have you any news?"

"No, Great Chief."

"Is there still nothing to show where it is kept?"

"Nothing at all. When they are not in the east room it is always unfastened, and there is no place there to lock anything up."

"Can it be Paul Nettleton carries it about?"

"I don't know."

Red Jaguar reflected for a moment and then shook his head slowly.

"It is not the way of white men, and there is probably some other place. His race have what they call a 'safe'; a thing of metal, to protect the contents from thieves and fire. Did you ever see one?"

"Yes, Great Chief; in San Francisco."

"There is none at Coast Castle?"

"I have never seen one."

"Then there is no way except for you to watch further. Do nothing rash, but try and learn where it is kept."

"It shall be done, Great Chief."

"If we succeed in this, your name will be forever linked with the new glory of our race. When our people are again raised to power, those who placed them there will be renowned above all save the blessed ruler whose name can never die. Be patient, steadfast and cautious, Loyola, for we must not fail."

"I am ready to risk my life, Great Chief, I

"I am only a woman, but the heart that beats in my bosom is strong and devoted to our cause. Let it never be said that our women are weak, for I am ready to shed even my blood to see our race restored to the power which was once theirs."

"I would there was an army of our people, all animated with spirit like yours, but where are they to be found?"

Red Jaguar paused for a moment, sighed and continued:

"We cannot even show graves to tell of our vanished power, but if fortune smiles upon us it may not always be so. Loyola, you may return now. Be shrewd and watchful, and if you find a clew let me know at once. The sacrilegious white man must be made to give up his unlawful possession."

"He shall!"

Loyola spoke the words vehemently, and then turned and glided away toward the house.

For a brief space of time she was visible, and then the darkness hid her from view.

Red Jaguar remained gazing away into the night, his massive figure looking like a statue of heroic size. Several minutes passed before he stirred, and when he did it was with startling quickness.

He wheeled about, sprung like a panther into a thicket; there was a struggle; and then he emerged dragging some one after him. The captive seemed the most harmless and abject of human beings, but one hand was fumbling in his clothing.

It came out holding a knife and the hand shot forward, but Red Jaguar caught it at the wrist and gave a twist that not only made the knife drop, but brought a howl of pain from the would-be assassin.

The chief spurned him with his foot and he fell to the ground, where he remained lying in servile silence for a moment. Then the victor spoke with dignified sternness:

"Get up!"

The conquered man arose, and stood with drooping head and cringing air. It was Garth Griffith, the half-breed.

"Bush-Wolf," said the chief, coldly, "what are you doing here?"

"I was merely sleeping in the thicket," replied Garth, with the most humble air possible.

"Do men creep about like snakes when sleeping?"

"Chief, I did not crawl, but—"

"Your tongue is as false as ever. Do not think to deceive me. I heard you advance, foot by foot. You are cunning and still, but I, too, have Indian blood. Thank all that is good, 'tis not like your blood. What do you want here?"

"Nothing, chief. I was only looking for game. I am a poor, humble and honest man, and I have to seek food when nature cries out for—"

"Enough! Seek food when you will, but turn not your eyes on human game. Bush-Wolf, I have no love for you, but it is in kindness that I say, keep away from me. I would not defile my hands with blood like yours, but beware how you meddle with me. Molest me again, and you may find you have hunted the wrong kind of game!"

With a slight gesture of farewell the chief turned his back and stalked away through the bushes. Garth Griffith was left alone, rage, disappointment and a spirit of revenge in his vicious mind.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FIRE-EATER WINS FRESH RENOWN.

WHEN Paul arose in the morning his anger had in no degree abated. Only for Barbara's work of the previous night he would have been forever rid of Frazer Hot Heart, and the danger of being identified as Bill Peters's slayer made so small that he might have breathed freely.

But Hot Heart still lived, and Paul had a presentiment that the jail would not long hold him. Why this was so he could not tell, but his fear of the man, as well as his hatred, hourly increased.

He had intended to be up early, so as to poison the old commodore's mind before Barbara could see him, but the long session with Professor Hazlitt had caused him to oversleep.

But never mind; he could speak just as stoutly, and he was resolved to be avenged on Barbara—a very brotherly resolution, but in keeping with his nature.

He went down and found Commodore Nick alone. Greetings over, he came to the point at once.

"Do you know what happened last night, father?"

"No. Did you and the Pernicians, and the Cartilagians, succeed in finding America?" was the grim reply.

"Nonsense! I refer to Barbara. She rode down to Clifftown to see Hot Heart, the Fire-Eater."

"So she says, and shiver my timbers, if I don't think she did see him!"

And the ex-mariner chuckled loudly.

"So she has told you?"

"Yes."

"What do you think of such conduct?"

"By Neptune! I think she's a chip of the old block. If she was a man, she would put Farragut, Porter and Dupont 'way into the shade in a few years!"

"Can it be you approve—"

"Of course I do! Zounds! there ain't many girls who've got that amount of nerve. I'm proud of her; she's all Nettleton, from the top of her head to them feet I used to think too small to be of use."

"It seems to me like a very unbecoming, immodest act on her part."

Commodore Nick's lower jaw fell. He looked at his son with an expression he might have bestowed upon a mutineer at sea. Then he sternly inquired:

"Young man, are you aware that you are speaking of your own sister?"

"Yes, sir, and that is why I am so anxious in the case. On one hand we have a jailed murderer; a noisy, quarrelsome fellow known as 'The Fire-Eater,' while on the other is a young lady whose good name is dear to us. I claim that she has disgraced us."

Commodore Nick struck his ponderous first upon the table in sledge-hammer style.

"Well, by George, sir, I claim that no man can insult my daughter to my face! She rode to Clifftown to save a human life, and 'twas right to do it if the prisoner there had been Tom, Dick, or the Old Boy, himself. And when a woman does such a thing it is true heroism, sir. Heroism is the word, d'ye hear? and, by the beard of Neptune, I won't hear a kick on this ship while I sail her, by George. If you want to raise the biggest kind of a gale that ever warped a mainmast, just you abuse that little woman some more, sir. But not in this cabin, sir, nor on my ship, d'ye hear? Not another word, sir; we'll drop the subject, and drop it in deep water, too!"

The honest old mariner had talked himself out of breath, but he had carried his point.

Paul dared not renew it.

He met Barbara at the table with a stiff nod, and then sat in sullen silence, while she was gracious and unconscious to that degree peculiar to accomplished women in crises.

But Paul's cup of bitterness was not full.

In the middle of the forenoon came word that Frazer Hot Heart was out of jail. Evidence had been found that so completely cleared him that it had not been thought necessary to hold him for trial.

One of the best citizens of the vicinity had appeared and given evidence which may here be briefly summarized.

The night of the murder he had been riding along the Clifftown road, and had passed Palmer Hague just as the latter rode out of the avenue which led from Nettleton's to said road.

Going on, he had made half the distance to the ruined convent when he saw a man standing by the roadside. This man had looked at him sharply, and then started back toward the bushes. The point was just where Hague had been shot.

Riding on, the witness had reached "Convent Rest," and found the upper part lighted. One of the windows was open, and Frazer Hot Heart stood beside it, with his coat off, winding his watch, as though about to retire for the night.

Just then a rifle-shot sounded in the rear, and then came the clatter of hoofs. Looking around he saw a horse galloping toward him, saddled and bridled, but riderless. It passed, and he was prepared to swear that it was Palmer Hague's horse.

He would have gone back to see if an accident had occurred to the owner, but was in a great hurry, and it did not occur to him that there had been foul play. In fact, his mind had been so taken up with other matters that he scarcely thought of it again until he heard of the murder.

As Hot Heart had stood by his window during all this time, it was decided that a satisfactory *alibi* was proven.

But there was another point in his favor; the fatal bullet would not fit his rifle.

All this was so in his favor that he was released.

Paul Nettleton found his presentiment realized, and was furious over the Fire-Eater's release. He took the ground that though Hot Heart had stood at the window when the citizen heard the shot, there was no proof that this particular shot had been the one which killed Hague.

The Fire-Eater might have afterward come out and done the deed.

His opinion amounted to but little; Hot Heart was free, as was amply proven when, a little later, a boy brought a sealed note to Barbara. She opened it, and then her cheeks flushed as she saw the signature.

The letter was as follows:

"MISS BARBARA NETTLETON:—I dare say that you are already aware that the flimsy charge against me has fallen through, and I am again a free man. Such is the fact. Arrested for a crime of which I was wholly innocent I have seen the entire fabric of straw fall to pieces, and am again peacefully situated at Convent Rest.

"I am, however, led to ask one question: How

would it have been had you not come so nobly to my aid last night? Miss Nettleton, I owe my life to you. Words are weak when the heart is full; an emotion which springs solely from the mind is more eloquent than the overwhelming feelings of a grateful heart; but I will—nay, I *must*—say that I shall ever regard you as the most heroic, the noblest and the loveliest of your sex.

"Forgive me if I speak too boldly, for I do not say one-half that is in my heart. Were I to do so— But I dare not! I might offend, and I would sooner lose my life. My heart is full of eternal gratitude.

"I will not sign to this the absurd name by which I am known around Clifftown. Please think of me as your grateful servant, M. FRAZER."

Miss Nettleton's eyes sparkled, and her cheeks were pink with inward emotion. But she was not offended. Offended? Perish the thought! What woman could take offense at gratitude and admiration expressed in such courteous, eloquent, respectful terms?

We will not pause to analyze Miss Nettleton's mind. Enough to say that she softly murmured:

"I am very, very glad that I went to Clifftown. I have saved a man who, though he may not always have done right, has a keen sense of right and honor. How well he writes! Surely, such a man cannot be all bad; he must be— noble!"

Alas! for the frailty of human opinion and human hope!

In less than an hour came the news that the Fire-Eater had visited and chastised Don Esteban Villegas.

It had come to the late prisoner's ears that the Mexican had stated that there had been previous trouble between Hot Heart and Hague, arising from the fact that the former had made love to one of the latter's servants, and, when she refused him, had been so violent that Hague was obliged to interfere. This story Villegas had spread broadcast, as a reason for the Fire-Eater's enmity toward Hague.

When Hot Heart heard of it, he called first of all upon the servant.

She promptly retracted, admitting that it was false, but would not acknowledge that Villegas had bribed her to corroborate his fiction.

Probably she dared not.

Then Frazer had gone to Don Esteban, and asked him to acknowledge that he had spoken falsely.

The Mexican refused; they quarreled; a challenge had been given by the Fire-Eater and declined by Villegas; and then Hot Heart had produced a whip from under his coat and punished the Mexican in this off-hand way. First report said that the whip had been applied to his face with terrible effect; second report stated that though the whip had been thoroughly used, only the back of the victim had been visited.

Again the vicinity rung with the Fire-Eater's name, and the exploit certainly did not gain favor for him. Sympathy went with Don Esteban, a rich gentleman, and against the reckless stranger who lived a vagabond life in the ruined convent.

It was a shock to Miss Nettleton, and she took no trouble to defend Mr. Frazer, or whatever his name was.

His letter, however, was not burned, and she was privately of the opinion that the Mexican had received only what he deserved. If he had deliberately slandered Hot Heart, he had certainly acted like a villain.

During the afternoon Miss Nettleton had a visitor.

Rosa announced that there was a lady in the parlor who wished to see Barbara, but had given no name, and the latter went there at once.

A tall, peculiar-looking woman was there, and she rose and stood staring at the girl with a fixedness far from pleasant.

"I am told that you wish to see me," said Barbara courteously.

"Are you Miss Nettleton?"

"Yes."

"Then I do want to see you!" was the quick, venomous reply. "I want to see her who bewitched Palmer Hague and lured him away from me, his legal wife!"

CHAPTER XIV.

ZENOBIA.

BARBARA started back.

The words were striking and startling enough in themselves, but when taken in connection with the bitter, hostile way in which they were spoken, and the manner of the woman, were enough to unnerve an ordinary person.

The uninvited visitor was probably less than thirty years of age, but might well have passed for forty. Time had certainly had some powerful ally to brand such signs of age as were on her face, and Time's most faithful and relentless ally is Trouble.

The visitor was thin-faced and haggard, and her once-dark hair was plentifully sprinkled with gray. Her eyes alone were brilliant, but it seemed anything but a natural brilliancy. Anger brightened them now to a glow, but it might be the wild light was always there.

Miss Nettleton's usual composure was not then noticeable.

"You, Palmer Hague's wife!" she faltered.

"His widow! Don't forget your work."
 "What do you mean?"
 "Oh! how innocent we are!"
 "If you intimate that I am acting a part, you are mistaken," Barbara replied, with dignity, and now as calm as ever. "Of course I know who you mean by Palmer Hague."
 "You ought to."
 "And you were his wife?"
 "Yes."
 "Zenobia Lee?"
 "I see that you are well informed!" cried the woman, bitterly, "I suspected that he had told you all."
 "You are very much mistaken, madam. Mr. Hague never mentioned you, directly or indirectly. I had your name from an entirely different source."
 "But you knew it; yet went on and tried to marry—"
 "Wait!" said Miss Nettleton, with cold dignity. "Since you compel me to say it, I never heard of you or your name until the night that a kind friend saved me from becoming the dupe of a man already married. I supposed Palmer Hague a single man, and was about to become his wife, but the truth was told in this very room, before the assembled guests."
 "Do you expect me to believe this?"
 "Can any person in her right mind believe that I would marry a man already married, and thereby wreck my own life?"
 "Why did you lure him on?"
 "Pardon me. I did not lure him on."
 "You knew him in San Francisco?"
 "I did."
 "He followed you here?"
 "Yes."
 "Am I to believe he came without being asked by you?"
 "Yes; and, more than that. I did not suspect he was coming until he arrived. I did not want to see him."
 "Indeed!"
 "Once before, I had refused him."
 "In San Francisco."
 "Yes."
 "Yet, he deserted me and came here."
 "It was entirely his own work."
 The anger had died out somewhat from the worn face, giving Mrs. Hague more of a womanly look, and she now remained silent, looking thoughtfully at the floor.
 "I assure you, madam," added Barbara, kindly, "that I do not want ill-feeling between us. I never dreamed that Mr. Hague had a wife until the revelation came, and deep is my regret that I did not know it long before. It would have saved us both much trouble."
 The wild eyes were suddenly raised, and the hostile gleam was in them once more.
 "This does not explain all," she said. "Who killed him?"
 "That is unknown."
 "Who had a motive to kill him?"
 "No one, so far as is known."
 "It is false! You are a rich, proud woman, and when you knew the truth it must have cut like a knife. You had been disgraced in the presence of all your fine friends. Had no one a motive to kill him? Woman, can you brazenly say that you were not the murderess?"
 Barbara recoiled.
 "Great Heaven!" was all she could say.
 "Hail the shot goes home!" cried Zenobia, in a tone of exultation.
 "Surely you do not think me so wicked as that?"
 "It is just what I do think."
 "But I was here, in the presence of a dozen people when—the fatal shot was fired."
 "Ah! but you may have hired the assassin."
 "You are mad!" retorted Barbara, unable to maintain calmness longer.
 "There is a mystery about the case which I don't understand."
 "I can well believe that."
 "What do you mean?"
 "You do not talk like one who knows her mind. You are determined to blame me in some way, and if you are baffled in one direction you turn in another."
 "It is plain to me that you are an evil woman."
 Miss Nettleton sat in silence; she would not degrade herself by continuing such a conversation. She would have received Mrs. Hague with every possible kindness had the widow been reasonable, and have given her sincere pity; but to sit in her own house and be wrongfully accused was too much to bear.
 Zenobia suddenly arose.
 "I will not remain here any longer."
 Miss Nettleton bowed; the decision pleased her.
 "But you haven't seen the last of me," the widow added. "My husband's blood cries for vengeance, and I shall see the guilty brought to justice."
 And then she flounced out of the house in a vicious way.
 She had come from Spurburg in a carriage, and re-entering this, was driven away toward the south. Not until she was well clear of Coast Castle did she give the driver further di-

rections. Then he was told to take her to Don Esteban Villegas's.

When she arrived the Mexican was seated in his private room, trying to smoke himself into a happy mood by means of a cigar.

It was a difficult task. His back was smarting where he had been lashed by Frazer Hot Heart's strong arm, and his pride smarted even worse. He was not disposed to overlook the offense. He had refused to fight a duel at first, but not because he was afraid of the Fire-Eater.

He was something of a fire-eater himself, but was trying to ingratiate himself into the good graces of people who, he knew, would not approve of such a course. But this insult must be avenged. If another little scheme he had in his mind did not work, he would certainly challenge Hot Heart.

A lady visitor was announced and he went to see her.

She was a stranger, but when she gave her name a look of annoyance appeared on his face.

"I have come as you requested," said Zenobia, for it was she.

"Well, I must say you've been a long while about it," he curtly replied.

"I came as soon as I received your letter."

"But too late to prevent the marriage."

"Something else prevented it."

"Yes."

Don Esteban shivered.

"Palmer Hague is dead," continued the widow, "but his foul murder remains unavenged. I am come at last, and I will devote my whole life, if necessary, to punishing the guilty."

"Of course you are right in that, and I shall be glad to help you, if necessary, but the proper officers will doubtless hunt the criminal down. They are far shrewder than we are, Mrs. Hague."

"I am not so sure of that."

"I assure you they are to be trusted."

"Have they a clew?"

"Ah! they would not confide it until the arrest was made."

"One arrest has been made."

"True."

Don Esteban scowled as he admitted it.

"And one mistake made."

"That don't follow."

"What do you mean?"

"Frazer Hot Heart may yet get a rope in the case."

"I have heard the case, and I think him innocent. I have a theory worth a dozen of that. As I came along I called on Miss Barbara Nettleton—"

"You did?"

"Yes."

"Why the fiend did you do that?"

Don Esteban was angry, but Zenobia answered with perfect confidence in herself and her system.

"Because I wanted to see her. I charged her with having set one of her servants, or somebody else, on to slay my husband; and never did I see guilt more plainly expressed than in her face. That is the proper clew. That woman was at the bottom of the scheme, and we have only to find her confederate and make him confess, and all will be as clear as day."

Don Esteban reflected before answering.

He did not like the situation.

When he wrote the news to Zenobia and suggested that she come to Clifftown, it had been because he wished to prevent Miss Nettleton's marriage to Hague. He was not sure but there had been a divorce in the former case, but felt sure that with Zenobia as an ally he could break off the marriage.

Now, the woman's usefulness was past, and he wished she had remained away.

Renewing the conversation he tried to induce her to return to San Francisco, but without avail. She was firm in her purpose. Next, he considered how he could turn her mania to his advantage.

She would have it that Barbara Nettleton was guilty. He wished to marry Barbara. It was absurd to suppose her guilty, but Zenobia could inflict a good deal of mortification and trouble if she persisted.

This was not what Don Esteban desired. He believed he had the means of compelling Barbara to accept him as a lover, and Zenobia would be in the way.

However, she was not to be gotten out of the way at will, and he managed to effect a compromise by which she agreed to go to Clifftown and keep silent until she heard from him again. Possibly, he thought, he might be able to make her useful.

He saw her start for the village, and then left the house, himself.

Going half a mile he entered a little grove of trees where he found two men. One was an evil-faced Mexican; the other was Garth Griffith, the Bush-Wolf. He had not reached the place unseen by the half-breed, but the way in which he was greeted proved that he was expected.

"I am late," he said, abruptly, "and in a hurry at that. Let us come to business at once. I see, Garth, that you have found a man to help you, and I am satisfied with him. Lopez isn't a man of tender conscience."

"Caramba! no, senor!" declared the second Mexican.

"Well, now for the job I want done. I have a keg of gunpowder in my house, and I want you to take it to-night, get it inside Frazer Hot Heart's old den, and blow him and the convent-building sky-high!"

The Bush-Wolf whistled softly.

"Are you afraid?"

"No, senor, but it is a risky job."

"The more risk, the more pay."

"Senor, we are always anxious to oblige," said Lopez.

"For money," added Garth.

Villegas held a handful of big gold-pieces toward them.

"How will that do?" he asked.

"Senor," said Lopez, quickly, "they will do more than the gunpowder toward blowing up the old convent."

"By my patron saint, you're right!" declared the half-breed. "Consider the bargain made. To-night we will blow Mr. Frazer Hot Heart up to the moon!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE FIRE-EATER TRIES "MORAL SUASION."

FRAZER HOT-HEART, or, as he had given his name to Miss Nettleton, Mr. Frazer, was in his own room and, seated in his easy-chair, was serenely smoking.

He was one of the few men who seem to thoroughly enjoy such position and employment. Every limb, and each puff at his pipe, told of complete satisfaction with himself and the world. If he had trouble, he put them aside when he sat down in that capacious chair.

Ten o'clock was fast approaching, and he only waited to finish his pipe before retiring.

At last he rose, knocked the ashes carefully from the pipe, laid it away, undressed, blew out his light and went to bed.

"Convent Rest" was dark and silent, and as its master was not troubled with weak nerves, he would probably soon be fast asleep.

Two men saw the light go out with deep satisfaction. They were crouched in a thicket at the rear of the ruins, and near them lay a suspicious looking keg.

The men were Garth Griffith and Lopez, the Mexican, and they were on hand with the gunpowder which had been selected to send Convent Rest and its master sailing up among the stars.

Some men would have had compunctions of conscience at the idea of such a deed, but not they. Human life was to them like that of the brutes and birds around Clifftown—not a whit more sacred.

"Caramba! the fool has turned in at last," said Lopez, who had not the Indian-like patience of his companion. "So he has a little mercy on us, and will not keep us waiting here all night."

"You must remember he did not know he was putting us to inconvenience," replied the Bush-Wolf, who, like the honest man he was, believed in giving every one his due.

"Well, we won't mention it to him to-night."

"Lopez, I like a good horse."

"Caramba! who does not?"

"The Fire-Eater has such a horse."

"Ah!"

"When the main building blows up, the horse will surely be killed also."

"If he is in his stable."

"Yes, and it seems a pity. Now, if we were first to take out the horse, he could be saved. It seems a pity to have him killed, he is such a noble creature."

The natural tenderness of the Bush-Wolf's honest heart was making itself felt, and Lopez confessed that he had a weakness in the same direction. Jack Jet was a strong, fleet horse, and might be made useful to man for years to come. Besides, if once possessed by these two honest men, he could be sold for a goodly sum.

So they both thought, and it was decided that Jack Jet ought to be theirs.

But how were they to get him?

His stable was of stone, and the door was locked. Once before the half-breed had tried to enter, and though Philip Warburton had interrupted him prematurely, he knew that it would be no easy task to pick the lock. However, the honest man had brought along his bent wire, and he felt in a mood for trying his luck again.

It was decided that he should try, and they crept toward the stable.

First of all a circuit of the main building was made, and they decided that no window was open and, consequently, there was no danger that they would be overheard. So Garth attacked the lock.

Patiently and cunningly he moved and twisted the wire, trying to catch the bolt, but it was obstinate and seemed to delight in worrying the honest man. Twist and punch as he might, the bolt would not stir.

It was not until the struggle had been long continued that they gave it up, and then only at the earnest desire of Lopez. Much as he desired the horse he remembered that Don Esteban had a prior claim on their time, and where so many vagabonds like themselves, and

more decent people, were often abroad at night, they were liable to be discovered at any time.

They reluctantly abandoned the attempt and prepared to blow Frazer to destruction.

Here they believed they would have great trouble.

The original windows of the building had been high and narrow, but they were in themselves things of the past. Only six openings in the walls remained, through which had gone the wind and rain unchecked for scores of years. Consequently, they had only to climb through the openings, place the keg of powder and lay a slow match.

They went about the work cheerfully.

Several stones piled outside brought them to the level of the window, and then the half-breed crawled through and stood inside. Lopez then raised the keg of powder, Garth received it, and it was deposited on the floor.

The Mexican followed and, producing a dark-lantern, they surveyed the place. It was as we have once before seen it. The dust, the litter, the old altar and the winding stairs were there, and at the top of the latter was the closed trap-door which made Hot Heart's solitude complete.

The intruders did not venture near the stairs, but proceeded to complete their work.

The head of the keg, already loosened, was removed, and the keg so arranged that it would do the most damage when the explosion came. Then a piece of ordinary lamp-wicking, which Don Esteban had soaked in some chemical preparation, was laid as a slow-match, one end being thrust into the powder.

He had said that it would burn twenty minutes, which would give them ample time to get well away.

"Is everything ready?" asked the Bush-Wolf.

"Yes."

"Then I'll light it."

The scoundrel scratched a match, and lighted the end of the slow match.

"Now, let us get out," he said.

"Wait a moment!"

The words came in a new voice, and they wheeled in sudden consternation.

There stood Frazer Hot Heart, a revolver in each hand, and the muzzles bearing full upon Garth and Lopez.

"Stand where you are!" he added, in a voice which made them tremble. "Not a move, or you are dead men. I've seen other scoundrels than you, and know how to deal with them. If you raise a hand against me, or try to escape, I shall be obliged to shoot you down right where you are!"

"Oh, mercy, dear senor!" implored the honest Bush-Wolf. "Pray turn that revolver away. Far be it from us to harm you. We are only—only—"

Frazer laughed aloud.

"The excuse comes hard, don't it?" he cried.

"Well, I should think it would. Don't try to find one, for it is out of the question. Griffith, have you a match?"

"Yes, senor."

"Light it!"

The half-breed obeyed.

"You will find a larger lamp behind the altar, where I was concealed until a moment ago. Light that; we want to be illuminated. But, mind you, no attempt at escape, or I will put a bullet clean through you."

The Bush-Wolf obeyed, and a strong light was obtained.

"Senor," said Lopez, anxiously, "hadn't I better extinguish the slow-match? See! it is creeping toward the powder dreadfully fast!"

"Let her crawl! I am not so in love with the world that I object, and of course you don't, for in that case you would not have set the fire a-going. In plain words, gents, we'll let her burn, and all go to smash together!"

"*Madre de Dios!*"

Garth uttered the cry in a terrified voice, and his hands went up with the old gesture, while Lopez turned white.

"What's the row?" the Fire-Eater coolly asked.

"Oh, senor! dear senor! you wouldn't do that? I ain't fit to die!"

"You certainly are not fit to live."

"But you will die, too."

"Yes, certainly."

Cool and unmoved was the Fire-Eater's voice, but Garth glanced at the half-consumed line of wicking and began to wring his hands and cringe like a whipped dog.

"Oh, senor, have mercy upon me! I am a most miserable man, and—"

"Mr. Griffith, sit down on the powder-keg!"

"Oh, no—no! Do not—"

"Obey me!"

Hot Heart thundered the words, and the Bush-Wolf started to obey, but became suspended in the air, as it were, something like a letter Z. There he stopped.

"Sit down!"

The deaf might almost have heard that shout, and the Bush-Wolf dropped, as much from fear as any other cause.

"Don't touch the slow-match, or I'll shoot your head off. Now, you Mexican, it's your turn!"

Lopez began to plead piteously, but the iron-

handed Fire-Eater compelled him to sit with his back to the unopened end of the keg. He now had them both in good position, and a grim smile crossed his face. They were utterly demoralized, and he would not have been surprised to see them begin to whimper like school-boys.

"About five minutes more and up we go!" he observed. "Have you made your wills, gents?"

They answered only with groans and lamentations.

"You make a good deal of row over a small affair," he continued. "Bless you, it will be a quick send-off when the powder 'ketches,' and there will be no need of incineration."

More lugubrious groans.

Frazer, however, dared not prolong the scene. He had no idea of being blown up, and the powder might catch at any time. He stepped forward, put his foot on the little tongue of fire, and one danger was over. There would be no explosion.

The Fire-Eater turned to the two ruffians:

"Get up!"

They obeyed and began to utter voluble thanks, but he stopped them sternly. Taking up a coil of a rope, he ordered Lopez to bind the Bush-Wolf to the altar, with his face toward the stone.

This order puzzled both men, but the revolver still bore relentlessly upon them, and the Mexican, at least, saw the need of obedience. He obeyed, despite Garth's angry glances.

"Now, gents," resumed Hot Heart, "I am going to try the efficacy of moral suasion. You have no idea how much good there is in it until you have seen—and felt—it tried. Senor Lopez, will find a whip behind the altar. Take it and apply the rod of correction to our dear friend's back soundly."

The Bush-Wolf set up a howl as lugubrious as that of his cousin, the four-legged wolf. If this was "moral suasion," he wanted none of it.

But his wishes went for nothing, and with the revolver staring him in the face, Lopez had no choice but to obey.

He swung the whip aloft, and then it fell upon the half-breed's back. He would have made the punishment light, but Frazer preferred to be the judge of that, and he was not allowed to be merciful.

Garth was thoroughly whipped before being released.

By that time his anger was at fever-heat against his companion in crime, and when he was ordered to tie Lopez in the same manner, he obeyed with more zeal than seemed necessary. The tables were turned, and he regarded it as a sacred duty to see that the Mexican got his share of "moral suasion"—and the whip.

And he certainly did.

When Hot Heart motioned for the punishment to cease, there were two smarting backs and angry hearts in the place, and each ruffian blamed his friend for laying on so hard.

"Our little circus will soon end," then said the smiling Fire-Eater, "and we can all go to bed and sleep the better for the exercise. First, however, one question: Why did you come here to blow me up?"

The men hesitated, and looked at each other.

"Spit it right out, gents."

"It ain't safe, senor," finally replied the Bush-Wolf.

"Tis far safer than to refuse, believe me.

Did somebody hire you to do the job?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

Still no answer.

"Gents, I reckon you want about twenty

more lashes each, solidly applied."

"No, no!" cried Lopez, in terror. "It was Don Esteban."

"Just so; I thought it. Honest Garth, re-

lease your friend."

The order was obeyed.

"Now, you will soon be at liberty to skip, but

before you go I have a little advice to give.

First, when you come here next time, don't be-

gin by fumbling around my stable door. You

will give yourselves dead away. Secondly,

when you come again, bring coffins instead of

powder-kegs. You'll need them, for, by all the

saints in the calendar, I'll shoot to kill if you

come nosing around my palace again. That's

all. *Git!*"

They were only too glad to go; they dared

not pause to utter thanks for the privilege, for

fear the permission would be withdrawn; and

in a few moments they were hastening away at

good speed. They went, but in each heart

burned a spirit of revenge, and words were

feeble to express their hatred of cool Frazer

Hot Heart.

CHAPTER XVI.

A CASE OF JEALOUSY.

WHEN breakfast was ready at Coast Castle the next morning neither Paul nor the professor appeared to meet the family there. A note from Paul had been left on the table, which said they were not to be called.

Every one understood the meaning of this. The two men had remained locked in the east

room until nearly morning, and they wished to make up for lost sleep.

Commodore Nick was more annoyed by their conduct than he confessed. He did not want open trouble with his son so soon after his return from long wanderings, but the impulse was strong in his mind to kick Professor Hazlitt from the house, and see if he could restore what he called the "normal temperature of the family."

He did not like mysteries, and the idea of the two men shutting themselves up in his own house and transacting business behind locked doors which they were afraid, or ashamed, to explain, was too much for him.

"Let 'em lay ahead!" he now said, belligerently; "they can stay there all day if they choose. Let 'em lay, but, mind ye, Mrs. Drake, don't keep the table waiting one minute. Folks in good health who can't get up to eat an eight o'clock breakfast in my house, may forage for grub when they do get up, d'ye hear? Maybe the Pernicians and Cartilagians will help 'em find a cold bite. But keep nothing waiting, Mrs. Drake, d'ye hear? If they prefer Rus'-y-tattle and Senna, and them other philosophers, to an inch-cut of beef-steak, why, shiver my timbers! if they mayn't fill up on philosophers!"

No one ventured to oppose Commodore Nick when he was in such a mood, and Barbara, at least, felt that he had cause to be offended. She could not help contrasting the few days which had elapsed since Paul's return with the years which had preceded it.

As a sea-commander her father had been noted as a kindhearted man, yet one who could storm as loudly as the best of them when a subordinate failed to do his duty. Such offenders had been severely taken to task, but, if their offense was not serious, they often went away with the taste of grog in their mouth, taken at the commodore's invitation to "wash away all hard feeling," as he said.

Since coming to Coast Castle he had seemed likely to degenerate from a lion into a lamb, and had been a happy man, but all had changed since Paul came home. He was not directly responsible for all that had occurred, but a great deal lay at his door, and Barbara blamed him for it.

Their father, she thought, ought not to have cause to complain of ingratitude from them.

After breakfast the commodore rode to Cliff-town. He went on business. Strong as was his faith in the ability of Bill Peters to care for himself, the old sailor's prolonged absence had become serious.

Commodore Nick had decided to have Nigger Arm dragged, and he went to make arrangements.

An hour later Don Esteban Villegas called and announced that he wished to see Barbara alone on important business. Leona Erwin glanced at her foster-sister's face when the message was delivered by Rosa, and though Barbara said nothing, it was clear that she wished Don Esteban had kept away. She went to the parlor to see him, however.

She and Leona were the best of friends, but, somehow, they did not confide in each other as much as seemed natural. Each had a secret which she hesitated to tell.

Leona cordially disliked Don Esteban, and all the more so since Palmer Hague's death. She had long before discovered the fact that the Mexican loved Barbara in his way, and she expected him to become an open suitor now that Miss Nettleton was free.

Consequently this call gave her fresh uneasiness.

The interview lasted over an hour, much to her annoyance, but Don Esteban finally went his way. Barbara, however, was not visible until the family met at noon at the table. She had gone to her room and locked herself in.

Leona's curiosity and apprehensions were aroused, and when she did see Barbara, she studied her face secretly, yet with feminine keenness.

She was troubled by what she saw there. Her foster-sister was as calm as ever outwardly, but the shadow of trouble was on her face. Curiously enough, she had noticed the same expression when Barbara became engaged to Palmer Hague.

She believed Barbara had never cared for the man to whom she was so nearly married. Could it be she had thoughts of contracting another engagement with which her heart could not go?

"I know she hates Don Esteban," she thought, "and if she allows him around it will be because she dares not— But there is a mystery about Barbara which I cannot understand."

Leona was so affected by all this that she took her hat and went out after dinner. She saw two men in the garden. One was Joseph Jigson, the fat gardener; the other, Philip Warburton.

She happened to stroll toward where Philip stood, and it came to pass that when Paul Nettleton came out of the house, half an hour later, he saw the two young people standing together. Worse than this, Leona was arranging a little cluster of flowers on the young overseer's coat.

Now, when a young lady does this, it admits of but one construction. Ordinarily a woman does not care if a man goes uncared for and unadorned all his days. If she offers to arrange a button-hole bouquet for him, or to improve the looks of his necktie, it is a sure sign that her heart is as active as her deft fingers.

Paul knew this, and his face grew dark.

As before stated he had been nominally betrothed to Leona by the commodore ten years before—when one was seventeen and the other eight years of age.

He had come home with tacit understanding that they were to marry, but he was in no hurry about it. When he was ready, of course he had only to open his arms and she would promptly fall into them.

So he had thought, but this little episode in the garden suddenly opened his eyes and made the fires of jealousy leap through his veins. At one bound he went from sluggish indifference to passionate zeal. If the expression on Leona's face meant anything, it was that she cared a good deal for the handsome young overseer.

Paul strode forward with quick, hasty steps.

Leona started, turned, and then flushed as she saw the new-comer, but though a shadow crossed Philip's face, he looked neither alarmed nor guilty.

"Warburton," said Paul, impatiently, "are the men at work in the north field?"

"Yes, Mr. Nettleton."

"Then why are you not in your place with them?"

"Because Commodore Nettleton told me to meet him here, at half-past one."

"Do you infer from that, that he wishes you to loiter around here all the afternoon?"

"I merely infer that he meant what he said when he told me to come here."

Philip's manner was provokingly calm. Insult was in every word and gesture of the young heir, but his venom fell as on an armor of steel.

"Well, your place is in the field," continued Paul, sharply.

"Pardon me; I am hired by Commodore Nettleton, and I obey his orders."

"Yes," retorted Leona, "and you, Paul, had better retire to your hermitage in the east room, and guard your diamonds from robbers!"

She knew that he resented any suggestion that he had things of value over which he and Hazlitt worked, and he grew white with anger at her well-aimed shot.

"You would do well to go to the house and not spend your time with such—"

The rash speech died away on his tongue, for at that moment Commodore Nick came down the walk.

Leona made haste to escape. The commodore noticed her flushed face, but attributed it to the sun, for he was as blissfully blind as men usually are in such cases.

Paul sauntered a few steps away, but when his father had given Warburton a few business directions in his usual bluff, kind way, the son came back and Leona, looking from the window, saw them engaged in a long, earnest conversation.

"There is mischief afoot," thought the spirited young lady, "and I can surmise what it is. But let them plot; if I don't foil their game I am mistaken. I just hate that mean Paul, and if he bewitches the poor old commodore, there will be a big breeze around Coast Castle!"

Leona thought emphatically, but acted quietly, and as she kept out of everybody's way there was peace in the house during the day.

But the storm was brewing, and she knew it.

Commodore Nick's face was a good barometer, and though it was not angry, its troubled expression told her that Paul had done his work well.

Just before the supper hour the old gentleman had a brief conversation with Timothy Welch; just after supper Philip Warburton called and was closeted with his employer for half an hour. Ten minutes after he went out the report was current in the house that he had been discharged.

When Leona heard this she went at once to the room where the commodore was then seated alone. His bluff face was grave and sad, and it was plain that his head, not his heart, had been in what he had done.

Leona went up to him quietly.

"Father, is Mr. Warburton going to leave here?"

He looked surprised, hesitated, and then briefly replied:

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He is talented enough to fill a better position."

"Did he ask leave to go?"

"A—well—we both thought it would be better so."

"Commodore, you discharged him."

The ex-mariner started, avoided her gaze, looked away from her and twisted his big fingers uneasily in and out among each other. But he was so slow in answering that the girl added:

"You discharged him because Paul asked you to, and he asked you because he found me talking with Mr. Warburton."

Commodore Nick looked up with increased uneasiness.

"Beard o' Neptune! who told you that?" he asked.

"I am not blind, father Nicodemus, nor am I inclined to see an innocent man suffer. Philip Warburton has done no harm, and he is not going to be made a victim. If he is driven away from Coast Castle, I shall go, too!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE GIRLS OF COAST CASTLE.

COMMODORE NICK stared at the speaker in blank amazement, scarcely able to believe the evidence of his own ears.

Leona's slight figure seemed, somehow, to have grown perceptibly more majestic; her eyes sparkled, and her cheeks were a most charming pink. She had always been spirited, and a little inclined to willfulness in small things, though never ungrateful or rebellious.

"This new departure astonished her guardian."

"Beard o' Neptune!" he repeated, simply because that was all he could say.

Leona wound one arm around the ex-mariner's neck.

"Father," she said, gravely, "if anybody is to blame, it is your daughter—myself. If anybody is to be sent away, send me. Don't make an innocent man suffer."

He tried to laugh in his old, frank way.

"Why, bless you, girl, Warburton is not a victim, nor does he go in disgrace. I've given him as clean a bill of health—I mean recommendation—as any man ever had, and he's sure to get a better position."

"Now, commodore, don't let us beat around the bush at all," said Leona, caressing his stubborn gray hair. "The long and short of it is, Paul is jealous of Mr. Warburton, and you are going to send him away because I was seen talking to him. Paul is afraid that I like Mr. Warburton better than him."

The commodore drew a long breath.

There was no way of evading the discussion.

"Little girl," he said, "you know it has been the favorite scheme of my life to have you and Paul marry."

"Yes."

"Well, I'm afraid—that is—a—that you are getting to like Phil Warburton better than anybody else."

"Do you suppose I would like him less if he was driven away, father?"

"But he ain't driven away. I laid the matter before him kind and considerate, and he up and said like a man that if such was my wish he would go without a word. I offered him a hundred dollars extra, but he wouldn't take it, and we never had a harsh word."

"That's because you are both so noble."

"He is a right square young man."

"You need him as an overseer."

"But he's agreed to go away."

"Tell him to remain."

"Little girl, I'm afraid Paul's idea is right."

Leona's cheeks grew pink again.

"If you want to make me love him, rather Nicodemus, the best way is to send him away."

"Do you love Paul?"

The blunt question made the girl hesitate, but only for a short time. She frankly answered:

"No."

"Do you know it is my dearest hope that you two will marry?"

"Yes."

"Then I think the best thing I can do is to send Phil Warburton away."

"Commodore, you know what I said."

"What was that?"

"That if he was sent away, I should go, too."

"Beard o' Neptune! would you go with him?"

"He has not asked me; consequently, I should not go with him; but when I see people made victims for my sake, it is time to do something. I shall leave Coast Castle, go to San Francisco, and never again be heard from by you."

There was a touch of the romantic in the last sentence, but Leona was very much in earnest about leaving.

Commodore Nick heaved a sigh which seemed to agitate the whole surrounding atmosphere.

"Well, this beats the record!" he exclaimed.

"I've commanded every kind of vessel, from a cat-boat to a man-o'-war, and thought I knew the ropes, but I'll be shot if I ain't struck a craft I can't understand!"

"It's very simple, father."

"So simple that I don't understand the first identical thing about it."

"Won't you notify Mr. Warburton not to go?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Well, because—because—"

"You have no reason. Come, give him another month's trial, father Nicodemus."

"So you can run off with him?"

"I shall run away alone if you don't."

Commodore Nick rubbed his chin in sore perplexity. What to do he did not know. He loved Leona with all the strength of his great heart; better, if the truth was told, than he did Paul; and he felt that she would keep her threat if Warburton was allowed to go.

And she was about as capable as a kitten of caring for herself in San Francisco.

"I must have time to think this over," he said.

"Hadn't I better write a note to Mr. Warburton, for you, telling him to wait awhile?"

"Perhaps you had."

Leona's eyes flashed triumphantly, but her manner was very demure as she wrote the note. This is what she wrote:

"MR. WARBURTON:—"

"DEAR SIR:—I wish you to remain at Coast Castle and continue in your present position, until you hear from me again on the subject referred to between us to-night. Your departure at this time would be a serious inconvenience to me, and I beg that you will not be in a hurry."

"Hoping you will not disappoint me, I remain, very truly yours,

"N. NETTLETON,

"Commodore Commanding."

The old gentleman read this slowly, and then placed one finger on the words "serious inconvenience."

"Ain't that a trifle strong?" he asked.

"Oh, that's merely a form of speech."

"It seems to be in the dogged-dogmatic—what tense, or mood, or what-not, do grammarians call it? But, never mind; let that slide; it'll do. But, see here; what's this? 'Commodore Commanding.' What do I command? I've give up my ship, and you won't allow me to turn off my hired help. Maybe that's another form of speech!"

"That's all."

"Well, considering it's a woman's letter, the thing taken in the bulk is fair; but, Lord bless you, you would never do to order a man-o'-war to haul down her colors. But let it slide. Call Tim, and send the note. I don't think Phil will go now."

The commodore rubbed his bristly chin doubtfully, while the young lady cemented her triumph by adding a few letters to the note.

"PER L. E."

She took care to underscore them heavily, and then Phil Warburton would have been blind, indeed, if he had overlooked or failed to interpret them. Leona relied as much, or more, on the addition as on the note, to keep him from leaving Coast Castle.

Shortly after the commodore left the room he was approached by Paul, who did not suspect that steps had been taken by Leona to overturn his plans.

The young man talked for awhile on minor subjects, and then asked, with assumed carelessness:

"By the way, father, where did you pick up Rosa, the house-servant?"

"In Frisco. When we came here some of the servants made a row about coming to so remote a place. I sent them all flying except Mrs. Drake and Loyola, and engaged Rosa to partially fill the vacancy."

"Did she come well recommended?"

"I dare say she did, though I let Bab read the bills of health. I looked at the girl's face for recommendation."

"And she has been faithful?"

"Yes."

"Let me see—how was it you came by Loyola?"

"Oh! you see I went ashore on the coast of Mexico, and fell among thieves. The villainous Greasers would have done me up, sure, but she saved me and my precious neck. That's how I come by her."

"What tribe was she of?"

"What tribe?"

"Yes."

"Bless me, I don't know; I never asked her."

"I wish you could find out."

"Why?"

Astonishment was in Commodore Nick's voice and face.

"Because some of those Indian tribes are infernal treacherous, and it would be well to know what kind of a person you have in Loyola. This is a wild country, with plenty of thieves outside. It is best to be sure there is no thief under your own roof."

The commodore's face had become perplexed and troubled.

"See here, Paul, what are you driving at? Of course I can see that this is off the same piece as your anxiety to have all the doors and windows tight shut, but, shiver my timbers if I know what you're driving at. Wait!—hear me through, boy. 'Tain't personal fear, for you're used to wild adventure. What is it? Come, confess that you've got a pile of diamonds that you and the professor are poring over!"

"My dear father, I swear that I haven't a diamond in any form, cut or uncut, set or in the rough."

"What sort o' a jewel is it, then?"

"There is no jewel at all, nor anything that you would give a dollar for. The professor and I are merely engaged in study. We may—yet produce a book on some undeveloped science."

"Neptune and Mars forbid! I don't want no book produced in my family. Rosa keeps a diary, like the foolish girl she is; but if we're to have a book writ about the 'isms' of the Per-

nicians and Cartilagians, and aimed dead against Chris Columbus, it's high time for me to set my foot down."

"Then there shall be no book. But are you sure Loyola is trustworthy?"

"Sure? Of course I be. She's served me for years, and is perfectly square."

"I wish I knew what tribe she belongs to."

"Ask her."

The commodore spoke curtly, and Paul fell into thought. The entrance of Barbara and Leona prevented further private conversation, but after Commodore Nick retired, he lay and meditated long on the singular conduct of his son. There were, to use his expression, "goings-on at Coast Castle which would drive a first-class navigator out of his right mind," and with his natural aversion to mystery, it annoyed him a good deal.

Shortly after breakfast the next morning, a boy brought Barbara a note. She opened it and read:

"MISS NETTLETON:—I am told that Esteban Villegas has boasted in his cups that he has made a conquest of your heart, and become your accepted lover. I don't want to interfere where I am not wanted, but if this is false, and you say the word, I shall take great pleasure in going over and flogging said Villegas. Your obedient servant,
"FRAZER."

Barbara's face flushed with shame, and then grew white with anger. She was cut to the heart. To be talked of familiarly and boastingly by men over liquor, was an insult which her high spirit could not tamely brook.

Without a moment's hesitation she ordered her horse, prepared for the ride, and in a few moments was galloping away toward the south. Tim Welch had asked if he should accompany her. She had curtly replied that she would go alone.

Her horse found her a merciless rider that day, and it was only a few minutes later when she arrived at the ruined convent. She then sprang to the ground, unceremoniously entered Convent Rest, and went up the winding stairs.

Reaching the top, she saw the Fire-Eater seated in his easy-chair, but at sight of her he quickly arose, an expression of surprise on his handsome face.

He expected nobody there less than the imperious lady of Coast Castle.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TROUBLE BY THE WAY.

THE Fire-Eater was at a loss for words only a moment. Then he courteously said:

"I am pleased to see you, Miss Nettleton. Will you accept this chair?"

"Thank you, Mr. Frazer; I am here to stop only a moment. I have received a note from you."

"I wrote one, Miss Nettleton."

"Allow me to ask the source from which you received your information."

"It was common talk at Clifftown, last night, and Dr. Marden and Mr. Archer were among those who heard Don Esteban say what he did."

"What did he say?" imperiously demanded Miss Nettleton.

"So far as I know, nothing worse than I stated in my note. He was drinking—had drunk too much—and boasted that he had 'caught your heart on the rebound,' as he expressed it; and had become engaged to you since Palmer Hague's death."

"There can be no doubt of the truth of this story?"

"I believe Marden and Archer to be reliable men."

"They are, no doubt. Thank you for your information, Mr. Frazer; thank you very much."

She turned away, but Frazer spoke quickly.

"One moment, Miss Nettleton. Do you accept the offer I made in my letter? Shall I visit Villegas?"

"I will visit him myself!"

"Pardon me, but doesn't he need a man's hand to deal with him?"

"He will find mine sufficient."

The Fire-Eater looked seriously troubled.

"Excuse me, but should you not have a male attendant? If you do not care to take me, your brother—"

"Thank you for the suggestion, Mr. Frazer, but I will go alone. Believe me, I am not ungrateful for your kind offer, but I must not connect you with the trouble. Thank you very much, and—good-day!"

She turned and went down-stairs, reached her horse, sprang to the saddle and galloped away toward Don Esteban's without a glance at the window where Frazer stood looking after her.

His face was troubled and well it might be. Fire-eater though he might be, his coolness never deserted him, while he saw that Barbara's was completely gone.

"I don't like this," he said, aloud, "and I'm afraid she will get into trouble. What a rash thing for her to do! Outwardly as calm and cold as ice, her heart is as impulsive as that of a child; a contradictory sort of nature, yet a charming one. And she is going to Don Este-

ban's! I don't like this; shoot me if I do! I believe I will saddle Jack Jet and ride slowly after her. I may be needed. Rash Barbara! I know not what will happen you!"

Miss Nettleton was speeding toward Villegas's at a hard gallop. She never turned her head as she rode, but always kept her gaze fixed on the Mexican's villa, and her face was set and white, with the shadow of an impending storm in her great dusky eyes.

Don Esteban was not likely to enjoy her visit.

He was sitting alone with a wet cloth tied around his head. He knew the meaning of the miserable pain he sought to allay; more than once he had felt that pain, and only when he had indulged too freely in liquor a little before. On the previous evening he had been intoxicated. He was not sorry for it, for he thought he had enjoyed the evening, but the headache which remained was villainous.

Without any warning Miss Nettleton entered the room.

He stared at her blankly.

He was well aware that with his head-bandage, disheveled hair, bloodshot eyes and general woebegone expression he was not a captivating object, and a slight flush came to his cheeks as he rose.

"Sit down, sir!" said Miss Nettleton, imperiously. "I want to talk with you."

"Certainly—I shall be pleased. But first, my toilet—"

He was stammering along, but she interrupted.

"Remain where you are, sir. My business can soon be done, and I prefer to talk with you as you are. It shows me that what I have heard about you is true."

Hot-tempered and aggressive as Villegas naturally was, he cowered now like a criminal in the dock.

"What have you heard?" he muttered.

"That you have been talking about me in your cups."

"Caramba! 'tis a lie!" he cried. "Who says it?"

"Some of the best men of Clifftown."

"When did I—was I alleged to have done it?"

"Last night."

The Mexican made a despondent gesture.

He felt that Miss Nettleton was sure of her position, and that denial would be useless.

"I drank too much last night," he said, humbly.

"And then went and made my name the subject of your conversation among other drunkards!" retorted the girl, towering before him with righteous indignation.

"Madre de Dios! what did I say?"

"That you had caught my heart on the rebound, and become engaged to me before Hague was in his grave."

"Oh! oh! I was a fool!"

"You were a cowardly scoundrel, but the mischief is done. There now remains but one course. You must publicly deny all that you have said."

"Deny it?"

"Yes."

"But it's true."

"You will deny it, or from this hour the doors of Coast Castle are forever closed against you, and I will never again speak to you!"

Don Esteban's face flushed angrily. It was seldom he was so long cowed as on the present occasion, and though her vehement words had been to him like a lash to a cur for a while, he now recovered his usual manner and sharply retorted:

"Carajo! don't you be too sure, my lady! Have you forgotten why you practically promised to marry me, at no distant day? 'Twas not love that moved you, but something more potent—fear! Have you forgotten the secret I hold like a sword over your proud head?"

"I have forgotten nothing," was the steady reply; "but even your threat cannot change my purpose. You will lose nothing by denying your drunken boast; I shall lose all if it is not denied. As for your threat, it falls powerless. If need be, I can settle your claim and the secret with one movement!"

She displayed a revolver with an untrembling hand.

"Madre de Dios!"

Villegas uttered the words mechanically.

"What of the secret now?" she added.

He gnawed his lip fiercely.

"Do you renounce my claim upon you?"

"I renounce nothing. I simply ask you to retract your boast, in the presence of the men who heard it made."

Don Esteban brightened. He did not like to deny the report that he was engaged to the young lady, for it might operate against him, but while he held the secret over her head he surely need have no great fear. And it was easier to undo his mistake now than after trouble had been made.

"If I make every thing all right, will you continue to receive me at Coast Castle, as before?"

"Yes."

The promise came hard, for Barbara hated

the sight of his face, but she remembered the secret again. That made her helpless, struggle as she might. She was in this man's power, and he was pitiless. This she knew from previous experience.

"All right," he answered, promptly. "I'll go to the village, acknowledge that I was drunk, and that all my rambling talk was nonsense. I'll deny, point-blank, what I said to them about you. And, now you are here, won't you sit down until I have put myself in better trim and—"

"Thank you," was the cold reply; "I will go at once."

She turned away, and as she did so a whip slipped from under her outer garments to the floor.

A quick change flashed over Don Esteban's face; he understood why that article had been brought. Had he refused to comply with her request, the lash would have been laid upon his face with all the strength of a wronged and indignant woman's arm.

For a moment he was staggered; then he stepped forward, bent, bowed, and handed it to her without a word.

Their eyes met.

It was a curious situation, and a column would not suffice to tell all that was in their minds. Barbara read the fact that he comprehended why the whip was there, but her composure remained equal to his own.

"Thank you!"

With these calmly spoken words she received the whip, and then went deliberately from the room and the house. Another minute and she was riding homeward.

Once away her conscience began to smite her as it had done when she rode to save Frazer; not that she had done what ought not to have been done, but because she had certainly usurped the position of a man.

"What a madcap I am!" she said, with a sigh. "I am always doing something to be ashamed of. I hope nobody will hear of this day's work. I try to be calm and dignified, but some wild impulse is always getting the better of my good resolutions, and then I go and do the maddest thing imaginable. I don't know why I am so rude. Really, I am as much of a fire-eater as Mr. Frazer. Frazer! Why does his face come so persistently before me?"

She devoted her time to considering this point, and rode on in such an absent-minded way that she forgot all that was transpiring around her.

She was rudely brought back to the present and real side of life. She was passing a line of bushes which bordered the road, when her horse came to a sudden stop.

She raised her head quickly.

Two men stood in the road, and one had the horse by the rein. She recognized them at once as two vagabond Mexicans she had seen about the place, and one she knew to be named Lopez. He had been detected in a theft at Coast Castle, and summarily dealt with by Tim Welch at the commodore's order.

A feeling of uneasiness swept over the girl.

The men were at all times to be feared, and the fact that they had thus stopped her in the road, together with the expression on their faces, positively alarmed her.

"What do you want?" she cried. "Stand back, and leave me alone."

"Not we," replied Lopez, with a laugh. "Do you suppose we will give up such a sweet prize in the moment of getting it? Caramba, no! Don't be in a rush, senorita."

"How dare you stop me?" she said, nervously handling her whip.

"I don't see that there is much 'dare' about it. We are two; you are one, and a woman at that. Not to waste words, sweet lady, you have got to go with us. You are a captive, and are going with us there."

He pointed to the high, wild hills which rose beyond Shaker's Timber.

"I shall do nothing of the kind!" cried Barbara. "Stand out of my way, or it will be the worse for you."

"Wait, senorita," added Lopez. "Let us clearly understand each other. No harm will be done you, but there is an old score to be wiped out. I'm going to get square with your father. You may not know it, but one day I was passing his house and saw something which pleased me. I thought I would take it. Your father saw me, called me a thief, and had his man drive me off the premises with a whip. Carajo! I feel the touch of the lash now, but I will have my revenge. You must go with us to the mountains, there to stay until your father pays much money for your release."

"He will never pay a cent."

"Then we will keep you forever."

"You haven't got me yet!"

As Barbara spoke she brought her whip sharply down on her horse's side, but the ruffians had foreseen the move. The second man sprang to his companion's aid, and the bound made by the horse did not free him.

Barbara's eyes were flashing with anger and excitement, and she quickly drew the revolver she had shown when at Don Esteban's.

Alas! for the bold attempt, she was dealing

with those stronger and more experienced than she, and Lopez caught her wrist and twisted the weapon away with one movement.

She had played her last card and lost!

CHAPTER XIX.

THE STRONG ARM OF A RED-MAN.

LOPEZ laughed mockingly.

"You see it's no use, *senorita*," he observed. "We have things all our own way, and are not to be baffled. You may as well give in at once and be sensible. Remember, I have said that no harm shall come to you. All we want is to get the commodore's money. When he shells out enough so we can go to Mexico, and live the rest of our days in luxury, you can go free. Eh, Jose?"

"*Caramba*, yes; willingly."

"I will not go!" declared Barbara, spiritedly.

"Pardon me, you will."

"Not a step."

"We shall compel you."

"Beware how you lay a hand upon me."

"Nonsense! There has been enough idle talk. First thing we know some one will come along and put a stop to the whole game. Lead out our horses, Jose, and we will be off for the hills."

In the meanwhile Frazer the Fire-Eater had mounted Jack Jet and ridden southward. He went in a very deliberate manner. Miss Nettleton had declined to have him accompany her to Don Esteban's, and he did not want to incur her blame by appearing to follow her.

He rode over the entire course without seeing her.

This surprised him, for he had not expected she would remain but a few minutes. When leaving Convent Rest he had taken notice of her horse's footprints. To settle a doubt he now dismounted and examined the soft road.

The result surprised him; he found the tracks going north, as well as south, which indicated that she had returned. Yet he had not met her, nor was there a branch road by which she could have gone. He rode slowly back, watching the footprints.

He was a fair trailer, and when he reached the point where the Mexicans had come from ambush he saw marks of what had occurred there. The end of the north trail; the efforts made by Barbara's horse to free himself; the tracks of the men, and those of the horses they had led from the bushes; all those signs were open to the Fire-Eater.

The trail of the three horses led into the eastern field.

Hot Heart looked in that direction.

No one was visible.

He looked further.

On the crest of the ridge bordering Shaker's Timber three horses and their riders were thrown into prominent view, and he saw that one of the latter was a woman. More than that, despite the distance, he recognized Barbara Nettleton.

The discovery startled him. If he read the signs of the road correctly she had been ambushed there; a struggle had followed; and now she was being conducted toward the wilds of Porcupine Ridge.

"There's foul play here!" he exclaimed; "and I'll bet my life she is being kidnapped. There are men enough around here to do such a piece of work, and I'll bet she has fallen into evil hands. By George! I'll find out before I go home."

Reining Jack Jet around, he rode into the field and began a rapid journey toward the east. The three riders had disappeared from the crest of the ridge, but he had their general course well in mind and rode on at a sharp pace.

Jack Jet seemed to enter heartily into the work, and he stretched out his shapely head as though impatient to cut down the kidnappers' lead.

The field was soon passed and the ridge ascended. Frazer paused on the top and looked carefully ahead. Shaker's Timber was ahead of him, but the occasional open patches offered hope that he might again sight the three riders.

He sat there as long as he dared, for precious time was passing, but as he saw no more of them he was obliged to decide to go on as it was. Then he was at a loss. He was not enough of a trailer to ride rapidly and hold enough of the course, and if he made a blind dash of it he might pass them, or go entirely in a wrong direction.

No; the only course was to take a pace at which he could make sure of the trail and go as fast as possible.

He did this, and soon found that the other riders had gone in a direction as near due east as possible. When this was decided he made better time and, choosing the most open way, found that the others had done the same.

In due time he reached the further side of Shaker's Timber. Still there was no sign of the pursued. They had passed the depression and entered the wood which covered Porcupine Ridge.

Speed now became impossible, and the Fire-Eater dismounted and continued the way on foot, with Jack Jet following after. The horse would go where he went like a dog.

The trail was crooked beyond this point, for the first party had continued to ride their horses, and were obliged to twist about on account of the abrupt pitch of the land in many places. Frazer believed himself still gaining.

The way became rougher as he went on, and had he not had the trail to guide him, he would have been puzzled how to get Jack Jet along in some places. The kidnappers apparently knew the way well, and it was his first visit there.

He knew he must be nearing the top of the ridge, and wondered where and when the scramble was to end. He was in this frame of mind when he emerged from a thick group of tall trees and saw an interesting scene before him.

There was a small, level space; then a bluff so steep as to be almost a cliff. At the top of the latter he saw three horses and their riders moving slowly along.

Two of them he recognized at a glance.

They were Barbara Nettleton and Lopez, the man who had tried to blow him up at Convent Rest in company with Griffith.

One moment they were visible, and then a point of rock hid them from view. He had not been seen. They were almost within his grasp, but he must take the same zigzag course pursued by them. It would be a long task to scale the ascent ahead of him, and Jack Jet could not go up.

He followed the trail at a run, and was pleased to find the half-circle much shorter than he had feared. In a short time he was at the top.

Here the way was so open that he mounted and rode on. All the wild glory of Porcupine Ridge now burst upon him. It ended in a somewhat level table of perhaps a hundred acres, but in no place was it smooth. The sparse timber and underbrush were subordinate to the rocks, but rocks were everywhere and in the greatest possible confusion. It might have been the ruins of a city once peopled by giants, so varied were the positions of stones which were, in many cases, themselves regular.

But Hot Heart had no eye for nature. He rode on along the gulch-like passage where led the trail.

Luckily for him, the kidnappers had stopped to let their horses breathe, and as he turned a curve in the gulch he saw the trio a hundred yards ahead.

The way was fairly level, and his resolution was quickly taken. If he had doubted before, the fact that Barbara's arms were bound would have settled the question of whether she was a prisoner.

Hot Heart's eyes flashed, and he drew a revolver, gave Jack Jet the word, and dashed along the gulch.

Unluckily for him, the ground was hard and stony, and Lopez suddenly looked back.

One look explained the situation; the dreaded Fire-Eater was sweeping down upon them like an avalanche!

Lopez saw that they had got to fight for it, but theirs was not the fleet horse-flesh, and prepared for the struggle with what courage he could summon. He carried a rod he had cut coming up the hill to urge the horses on, and he now gave Barbara's horse a savage blow, accompanied by a yell, which sent the animal away at a mad gallop.

Then both the Mexicans faced the Hermit.

He came down upon them like the wind, and both parties prepared to do their best with revolver and bullet. The first to fire was Lopez. He thought he aimed well, but the bullet went wild. Then Jose tried his luck. Still no success, and still the terrible Fire-Eater held his fire and dashed on toward them.

Jose's heart failed him, and he wheeled his horse and tried to run. Then the Hermit fired for the first time. He pressed the trigger without seeming to take aim, but Jose flung up his hands and fell from his horse in a heap.

The Fire-Eater had opened the ball, and he did not let matters drag. He fired again, and Lopez uttered a howl and dropped his revolver. He had a broken hand to remember Hot Heart by; but the latter was not done.

He kept on, and, just as the Mexican tried to flee, struck him with the butt of his revolver and laid him beside Jose.

He did not pause to see whether they arose; he had other and more important business.

The manner in which Barbara had been carried away troubled him. Bound as she was she could not guide her horse, and there was no knowing what dangers might lay before her.

She had already disappeared.

He shot away in pursuit, and, as the little avenue again curved, saw a sight he never forgot. Before him was an almost level space, free from bush and stone, but it ended twenty rods away in a broad, black chasm between rocks. And toward this chasm the startled horse was running, with Barbara sitting helplessly upon his back!

How deep the chasm was he could not tell, but a fall would undoubtedly be fatal.

And Barbara could not as much as raise a hand to save herself.

Hot Heart was equally helpless; he was too far away to do the least good, and though he still kept on, his blood seemed to grow cold as he contemplated the almost inevitable fate of

the beautiful mistress of Coast Castle. Oh! for a rifle, that he might take the desperate chance of shooting the maddened horse! But he had not the weapon, and another hundred feet would take horse and rider to a terrible death.

But suddenly a new object crossed his vision.

From the cover of the rocks north of the level space sprang a human figure, which then rushed forward toward the flying horse. Frazer's blood thrilled once more. He recognized that massive, lofty figure; it was Red Jaguar, the Indian chief!

The Fire-Eater saw his purpose, but would he succeed?

The horse was dangerously near the chasm.

Red Jaguar ran with bounds like those of the animal for which he was named. Frazer could see lofty determination on the dark face; he almost believed he could see the flash of the Indian's eyes and the play of his swelling nostrils.

There was a moment of terrible suspense.

Then Red Jaguar's hand grasped the runaway's rein.

What would be the result?

Two steps the stalwart chief was driven back, and then with resistless strength he forced the horse back on his haunches and held him as though only a child was in his arms. A moment more and Frazer was there; another moment and the Mexicans' ropes were cut away and Barbara was in the Fire-Eater's arms.

She did not faint. Her face was pale; she trembled; but the Nettleton blood remained true, and she even managed to smile after a brief struggle with her weaker nature.

"Once more I owe my life to you," she said, somewhat incoherently, for he had no recollection of a previous event of the kind.

Neither was he inclined to take undue credit.

"It was another hand than mine which saved you," he replied. "Your preserver is yonder."

Barbara gently released herself from Frazer's arms and looked at Red Jaguar. He had the once-rebellious horse entirely under control, and was gently caressing its neck. Barbara went forward and laid her hand on that of the chief.

"Red Jaguar, I owe my life to you," she said, unusual feeling in her voice. "Life is dear to the young, and you have saved me from a terrible death. May God bless you!"

"Daughter," the chief replied, in his rich, strong voice, "I am repaid already. I have saved one I believe to be good and true, and she has shown me she is grateful."

"Nothing can sufficiently reward bravery like yours."

"I was in no danger."

"Oh! but you were. You might have been dragged over the brink of the chasm, or trampled under my horse's feet."

"The horse does not live who can master me in fair fight," was the proud reply. "When my hand is on the rein, they feel the touch of a master. Let me not boast like a Mexican though, for man would be weak but for the strength given by One who rules all men, be He the God of the white man or the Indian. I am glad that my arm has stood between you and peril, daughter, and I am sure I never did a better deed. There are few among the white people who have a face and form like Nettleton's daughter."

CHAPTER XX.

THE GATHERING STORM.

ALL women like to be complimented, and Barbara looked at the chief with friendly eyes.

"Thank you for your kind words," she answered. "I am sure I could have found but few such stout defenders as Red Jaguar. His heart is brave, and his arm very strong."

Somewhat proudly the Indian stretched forth his hand.

"It is the arm of a warrior!" he replied.

This was easy to believe, for the powerful, yet well-shaped, member looked fit for any great deed. It was as strong as his heart.

"I hope to reward you with more than words," Barbara added. "My father is rich, and if you are in need of anything, you will find his purse open and ready. You shall be paid, and well paid, in money."

Red Jaguar started back.

"No," he said, more quickly than usual. "I want nothing, and can take nothing from Nettleton. It is enough if his daughter is saved; her gratitude is my reward. Let us speak of it no more."

He turned to Frazer.

"There has been firing," he added. "What has happened?"

"For one thing, I had a slight skirmish just beyond the point of rock; a little target practice, which was of no consequence. Possibly, though, it would be well to see how my targets are getting along."

They went along the back-track, with Frazer leading Barbara's horse. When they passed the curve they saw the Mexicans' horses standing not far away, but Lopez and his friend were not to be seen. There was a possibility that they were hiding in the vicinity, waiting to get a cowardly shot; but when the chief heard that one of them had been wounded, he followed the red trail far enough to be convinced that they had gone in earnest.

The sun was at the zenith, and little time was

lost in starting down the hills. Barbara knew they would be worrying about her at Coast Castle.

The horses abandoned by the kidnappers were appropriated, the Mexicans having undoubtedly stolen them. In any case, they deserved to lose them.

Nothing of importance occurred going down the mountain, but Barbara thought she had never had two more courteous or devoted companions. Both were attentive to her comfort, and Red Jaguar was not a particle behind an experienced courtier in lofty respect to her as a woman.

As for Frazer, she could not look at him without emotion. He, as much as Red Jaguar, had saved her, as she thought. The chief did not explain how he had chanced to be on the top of Porcupine Ridge, but had stated that only for the revolver-shots his attention would not have been drawn to the runaway horse and his rider.

Thus had the Fire-Eater in turn saved her life.

The Fire-Eater! Barbara resented the name with a glow of indignation. Why should such a polite, courteous man be called thus? True, he had won the *sobriquet* by getting into numerous quarrels with people in and around Clifftown, and had a habit of challenging every one who offended him to fight a duel; but Miss Nettleton easily found an explanation of this fact—Mr. Frazer was eccentric.

There is a vast difference between eccentricity and quarrelsomeness. At least so thought Miss Nettleton.

When Shaker's Timber was passed Red Jaguar paused.

"We part here," he said.

"Here?" echoed Barbara. "No, indeed; you must go with me to Coast Castle."

"Daughter, I thank you," was the steady reply, "but my way is elsewhere. You are now safe from your enemies, and you have one protector left—a stout one at that."

"But I want my father to thank you."

"Can I be better rewarded?" asked the chief, with a grave smile. "Would the words of Nettleton be more pleasant to my ear than the musical voice of his daughter? Say no more, but remember that the Indian is grateful."

Barbara gave him her hand, and he bowed over it with lofty grace. Next he bade Frazer farewell, surrendered the horse he rode, and strode away on foot with a mixture of kingly dignity and panther-like suppleness.

"A strange—a noble man!" murmured Barbara.

Frazer started and seemed to arouse from deep thought.

"He is an Indian, yet a remarkable one for these degenerate times," he replied.

Had he spoken all that was in his mind he would have said:

"Red Jaguar is pleased with you, but will never be the friend of your family. If my suspicions are correct, he will yet set Coast Castle in an uproar; were he less noble, I should expect him to make it a house of mourning."

Their meditations were interrupted by the sound of a horse's hoofs on the hard turf, and, looking up, they saw Paul Nettleton galloping toward them. His face was white and angry, and the glance he shot at Hot Heart seemed almost murderous.

"In the fiend's name!" he cried, "what does this mean? Barbara, have you lost all sense of self-respect?"

There had been a slumbering fire in the girl's eyes, for his manner of advance had foretold trouble, and it now leaped to a flame, as it were.

"Sir!" she cried, with a manner which would have checked a man less headlong of character. But Paul bitterly continued:

"You are a Nettleton and here I find you in company with a low brawler, while an Indian is just sneaking away. Fine companions for Commodore Nettleton's daughter!"

"Paul Nettleton," she answered, in a concentrated voice, "it seems impossible to me that any man can be guilty of criminal folly like yours. I am your sister, yet you are not man enough to ask for an explanation. Instead, you make a charge that is dastardly."

"You can make your explanation to Commodore Nettleton. As for this fellow—this Fire-Eater—I am tempted to flog him on the spot!"

"I once heard of a man named Adam," replied Frazer, in a drawing voice, "who brought a heap of trouble upon himself by yielding to temptation. He ate an apple, but you may find a whole tree stuck in your throat if you keep on. But we need have no trouble; if you will step aside, I'll say a word to you in private which may possibly blunt the hair-edge of your passion."

"I will not step aside."

As Paul thus spoke he raised his whip and started his horse forward.

His intentions were not to be mistaken, but Frazer spoke with a change of voice which commanded obedience.

"Stop! Give me a chance to say one word; that which I would have said in private. Let me ask, how is George Temple Bennett?"

The whip fell to Paul's side.

His face grew pale, and he stared at Hot Heart like one who sees a ghost.

"You would have it," the Fire-Eater carelessly added, "and now you have a good reason why you should not flog me. Of course the flogging would be a trivial affair, but it's best done elsewhere than in a lady's presence."

Paul did not reply. He was still looking at Hot Heart with that dumfounded, frightened expression, and all his desire for a fight seemed gone.

Barbara was too much moved to analyze his expression, or to do more than vaguely wonder at his sudden silence, but she turned to her rescuer and quickly said:

"Let us ride on, Mr. Frazer."

They went without any remonstrance from Paul, leaving him sitting on his horse almost like one turned to stone. He watched until they disappeared over the crest of the ridge, and then brushed from his forehead perspiration not brought there by the temperature.

"Death and destruction!" he muttered, "is this man a human being or not? How did he know—May the fiends seize him! he is more dangerous than I thought. He knows about Bennett, and I now believe he knows how Bill Peters died. He is a veritable demon, and my neck is in danger!"

Again he brushed his hand nervously across his face.

"How did he learn my secret?" he continued. "Can it be—But why speculate? It is enough that I know he is as deadly to me as the hangman, himself, and I must guard my life. It is strike or be struck, and Frazer Hot Heart shall die if there is any way to kill him."

In the mean while the Fire-Eater and Barbara rode on until the entrance to Coast Castle was reached.

Here they parted, and Hot Heart went slowly toward his own quarters.

He looked back toward where Paul had been left, and saw the latter coming slowly down the hill. Frazer contracted his forehead in a grave frown.

"I am sorry that I was obliged to speak out, but the fool would have annoyed Miss Nettleton still further. I couldn't stand that. I suppose he will be thirsting for my blood now, and between him and Villegas, the Bush-Wolf and others, I may have a warm time. I'm sorry I had to turn Paul against me—and yet I journeyed hundreds of miles to see him here and be avenged on him. Ah! Barbara, how your face has changed the current of my thoughts and intentions!"

In a far different frame of mind was Paul going home. Everything seemed to be going against him. After he had believed himself rid of Philip Warburton his father suddenly changed his mind, and the hated overseer was to remain. The commodore gave no reason for this, and rather resented his son's inquiries.

Furthermore, Leona barely spoke to him since the scene in the garden, and he certainly had offended Barbara.

"Curse it! luck seems to be going dead against me; the whole world has evidently conspired to ruin me. But they'll find me a hard fighter. Egad! I'll win some of these games or turn Coast Castle and vicinity into a howling wilderness!"

His mood was not improved when he arrived home and found that Barbara had told her story to Commodore Nick and settled his position past change. He loved his daughter, and the danger she had been in startled him. She had told all except that she had seen Villegas, and her father was loud in his praises of Hot Heart.

"I've been foolishly prejudiced against that chap," he acknowledged, "but I'm a man who knows how to undo a wrong. He's a heart of oak, by Neptune! and he will find old Nick Nettleton ain't ungrateful."

And the ex-mariner's vehemence showed Paul the folly of talking against his views. Indeed, the younger man thought himself lucky not to be severely reprimanded for what he had said to Barbara, but Commodore Nick was sore-hearted as well as indignant. Was this the son for whose home-coming he had longed?

"I've made a mistake to let him travel so long," he thought. "I ought to have put him aboard my vessel and made him toe the mark like a common sailor."

Unfortunately for Barbara her efforts to stop the reports spread by Don Esteban in his cups had not been made soon enough to prevent the rumor reaching Coast Castle. Late in the afternoon the commodore told her what he had heard, and gravely asked if there was any truth in it.

"Certainly not," she replied. "I do not say that I shall never marry Senor Villegas, but there is no engagement now."

"Bab, do you really think of marrying him?"

Commodore Nick's face was very grave.

"I did not say so."

"But you intimated it."

"Oh, no; I said I did not say I would never marry him."

"I'm afraid Villegas ain't just the man for you or any other woman who wants

to be happy. He who talks of respectable women in his cups ain't a man to tie to."

"Have no fear for me father; no man has secured your daughter yet," Barbara replied, with assumed lightness, and she kissed him and left the room.

But, once alone, her face grew dark and sad. "I wish I could refuse the Mexican as easily as father thinks I can, but he holds a sword over my head. I am the most wretched of women, and the very sight of Villegas is hateful to me. But I dare not refuse him!"

CHAPTER XXI.

SOMETHING IS MISSING.

THE following morning there would have been a silent family at breakfast had not Leona, in a spirit of mischief, persisted in forcing Mr. Hazlitt into conversation. The taciturn professor was proof against the charm of beauty, and as reluctant to talk with a pretty girl as with any one else, but when Leona set out to make him talk, he was powerless.

Brief as he might try to make his answers, she had such a flood of questions at hand that he had to talk.

Perhaps, too, he was more sociable than usual on this occasion, and his well-chosen language showed what he could do when he tried.

Continuing her persecution, she kept him after breakfast, simply because she suspected that he and Paul wished to go to the east room and hold one of their mysterious "seances," to use her own expression.

Paul went away alone, but in a few minutes quick steps were heard in the hall, and he re-entered the room in a manner which made all look at him.

They were startled to see how pale his face was.

"Beard o' Neptune!" cried the commodore, "what's the matter? Have you seen a ghost?"

"I've been robbed!" Paul hoarsely replied.

"Robbed?"

"Yes."

"Sharks and mermaids! What's gone?"

"Something of value."

His gaze wandered to Hazlitt as he spoke, and the professor hastily arose.

"You don't mean that—that—"

"Yes; it's gone!"

Still Paul spoke hoarsely, but every one looked at Professor Hazlitt. The little old man had dropped heavily into a chair, and his face was the picture of dismay. Suddenly, however, he sprang up, darted forward and seized Paul's hand.

"No! no!" he cried; "you don't mean it; you can't mean it. You are only joking. Tell me you don't mean it!"

He spoke beseechingly, his face working strangely, his eyes wild and terrified; and could not have shown more emotion if his own life had been at stake.

"I wish it was a joke, but 'tis not. It is gone!"

"Oh! oh! oh!"

The professor almost wailed the exclamations, and then he actually beat his open hands upon his head as though it had been a drum.

"I am ruined!" he cried. "My last hope in life is gone. Oh! let me die! Call the police! Send for help at once, and have the thief arrested. Oh! my soul, I am a ruined man!"

"Beard o' Neptune!"

Commodore Nick uttered the words in stupefied wonder. He had not imagined the little professor capable of any emotion, and here he was almost insane about—about what? Here was the mystery. Both he and Paul were deep in the gulf of despair, and nobody but they knew what the matter was.

"Yes," said Paul, quickly; "your idea is correct, professor. We must have an officer at once. Ha! I remember that there is a San Francisco detective at Clifftown. We will have him up here at once; Tim shall go for him at full speed."

The young man's hand was almost on the bell, but the commodore suddenly sprang forward and stopped him.

"Hold up a bit!" he commanded. "Before you go to sending for any detectives, or any other kind of land-sharks, I want to know what all this row is about. What is stole?"

Silence followed his question.

Neither Paul nor the professor volunteered a reply.

"Did ye hear me?" he grimly asked.

"I heard you, father," Paul answered, "but I am unable to answer at present. Important reasons render it necessary that the matter be kept as secret as possible, and I shall not confide in the detective."

"He's mighty likely to take a case when he don't know what he is working for."

"We must arrange it somehow."

"Is it a part of the Pernician, and Cartilagian, scheme to uproot Columbus and America?"

"Something of that sort."

"And you refuse to tell me what?"

Paul hesitated. He knew that Commodore Nick was angry, and it was natural that he should be. But it was necessary to pacify him, if possible.

"My dear father, don't put it in that way. You would hardly understand if I told you. Neither money nor jewels has been lost; only—a—documents relating to our researches. All will be made clear in due time. Pray give me leave to send Tim for Detective Neat."

"Do it; do it if you want to. I'm only a passenger," sourly replied the veteran.

And so the San Francisco detective was sent for. He had just finished a trail and was waiting at Clifftown for the boat to take him back, but he promptly obeyed the call to assist the rich Nettletons, not knowing how few of the household wanted him there.

Paul and the professor had, in the meanwhile, held a conference in the east room. What was said nobody else knew, but Paul came out with a set, determined face.

Mr. Hazlitt had lost all his individuality, and was pale, nervous and ill at ease.

Detective Neat proved to be a tall, slender man with an expression of deep melancholy, but keen, observing eyes.

Paul took the lead in conversation. An article of value had been stolen from the drawer of the "secretary" in his room, and he was willing to pay well for its recovery.

"What is lost?" asked Mr. Neat, with deep melancholy.

"Documents of value."

"What is their nature?"

"Is it necessary that I should state?"

Paul asked the question with apparent embarrassment.

"Certainly. How can I hunt for a thing the nature of which is unknown to me?"

"I will fully explain to you later, then."

Commodore Nick moved uneasily. No one save the members of the family was within hearing of Paul's voice, yet he still declined to speak plainly.

"If you think me, or Bab, or Leona, has robbed you, boy, spit it right out," he said, sharply.

"My dear father, I think nothing of the kind. It is only because you would not comprehend that—"

"Father," interrupted Barbara, coldly, "I think that you and I, and Leona had better retire. We are evidently three ghosts at this mysterious banquet."

"Shoot me for a pirate! if I don't believe you're right, my girl. We'll go."

The veteran rose, but Paul spoke in a firm voice:

"Wait, sir, if you please. It is absolutely necessary that you remain. You must hear what I have to say."

Detective Neat's keen eyes were losing nothing, and he plainly saw that Paul had all his kindred against him. The man from Frisco began to think he had stumbled upon a family affair of no small magnitude.

Commodore Nick sat down again. He wanted to hear what was said, and would not throw away the opportunity merely to spite his son.

"Blow your bugle!" he growled.

"I wish to say," added Paul, in a hard, tense voice, "that I believe I know who the thief is."

"Ah!" said Mr. Neat, quickly, but very quietly.

"It is an Indian woman, named Loyola!"

"Beard o' Neptune!"

The commodore started to his feet, and then stood looking at his son for a moment in utter amazement; but a flush of anger then colored his face, and he struck his massive hand on the table.

"Young man, you don't know what you're talking about!"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but Mr. Neat is the proper judge of that."

Barbara touched her father's arm, and he subsided with docility not induced by his son.

"Allow me to ask why you suspect the Indian woman," said the detective—"also, who is she?"

"A servant in this house—the doer of the heavy work. Father found her years ago on the coast of Mexico."

"That explains in a measure who is she. Next, why do you suspect her?"

"She is the only member of the household whom we can suspect—and the thief was one of the household."

The shadow of a smile crossed Mr. Neat's face, but only to leave his melancholy more pronounced.

"Were the lost articles of value to her?"

Paul hesitated, and glanced at Professor Hazlitt, who in turn looked around the circle as though frightened.

"We will speak of that later," said Paul, with perceptible embarrassment. "First, let me state how the missing article disappeared—"

"Article? You used the plural number before," interrupted Mr. Neat, quietly.

"It should be the singular."

"Proceed."

"The missing article was safe at five o'clock yesterday afternoon. At that time I put it in the secretary drawer and locked it up. This morning it was gone."

"Where was your key during the night?"

"In my pocket."

"And you slept in the room?"

"Yes."

"Are you a heavy sleeper?"

"Quite the contrary. I have no doubt that the theft took place before I retired."

"Was the key in your possession during the evening?"

"Yes."

"Is there more than one key?"

Paul glanced at Barbara, who coldly answered that there was but one key.

"Was the drawer broken open?"

"That is what puzzles me. There is no sign that such was the case, but how in the world did any one get in otherwise? I believe—"

He paused, looked secretly at Barbara and did not finish. Detective Neat arose. He had already seen that Paul did not have the sympathy of his relatives, and he felt that it was a waste of time to continue the conversation there.

"Show me the secretary and the drawer, if you please," he said.

Paul and the professor went with him.

The secretary was an old piece of furniture which had seen about as many hard knocks as Commodore Nick himself, but the wood was tough and firm, and Mr. Neat saw no sign of decay except that there were numerous bruises and, in places, the wood had shrunk apart where the various pieces met.

The drawer was a small one, and as tight as when first made, so far as the actual box-part was concerned. The detective examined it; saw that there was no chance for a rat or mouse to enter at the top; looked at the lock critically, shook the drawer and then said:

"Lock it."

Paul obeyed. Neat then bore down slightly on the knob, and, giving the drawer a quick, sharp pull—lo! it opened, leaving the bolt protruding upwa.d.

"I thought so," quietly added Neat. "The wood has contracted so that the bolt does not hold sufficiently to make it secure. We need spend no more time in speculating how it was opened. Any one could do it."

Saying this, he turned about, leaned against the secretary, looked at Paul with melancholy intentness and added:

"Now, young man, what is lost?"

Paul and Hazlitt had talked for nearly an hour to decide what to say to the detective, yet the former hesitated and glanced at his ally before he ventured the reply:

"A parchment."

"Um! Do you use the word in its only correct sense, meaning the dressed skin of an animal, prepared for writing?"

"I do."

"Was there writing upon it?"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE YELLOW PARCHMENT.

ONCE more Paul hesitated for a moment. He looked grave and troubled, while Professor Hazlitt's hands trembled with nervousness, and his eyes had a frightened look.

"Yes, there was writing upon it," Paul finally answered.

"What was the writing?"

"We do not know."

"Don't know?"

Mr. Neat spoke somewhat sharply, and his eyes seemed to read young Nettleton's mind. He knew he was on the track of a mystery, and was very angry that his employer did not speak out more fully.

"The writing was in cipher, and we have no idea what it was, nor how to translate it."

"Who wrote it?"

"Even that we do not know."

"Where did you get it?"

"In a curiosity shop in San Francisco. It was kicking around with a lot of waste paper, collected from scores of stores and offices—old odds and ends—but I saw it, and, being interested in ciphers and the like, set out to know what it was."

"Then its value is personal, not monetary?"

"Just so," said Paul, with a sigh of relief.

"Then why are you so anxious to find it?"

"Did I not tell you I was interested in secret writing, ciphers, and the like?"

"What reason have you for thinking that the Indian woman, Loyola, is similarly interested?"

Mr. Neat, hanging heavily on the desk with his hands spread wide apart behind him, looked at Paul with melancholy intentness, and his pointed questions were very annoying. Paul flushed, and the professor moved nervously.

"Loyola," the younger man replied, "is the only one of the household who would do such a thing, and I have noticed that she has been skulking around and prying into my affairs."

This was a falsehood from whole cloth. No one in Coast Castle had paid so little perceptible attention to him and Hazlitt.

"What could she want of the parchment?"

"It would, of course, be of no real use to her. Only natural viciousness could urge her on."

"Is she naturally vicious?"

"My father would say, no; I say, yes."

"How much are you willing to pay to have this cryptogram restored to you?"

"Would five hundred dollars sufficiently pay you?"

"Unless I devote a good deal of time to it, it would."

Then Mr. Neat looked out of the window and drummed a slow, melancholy tune on the secretary with his fingers.

"There may be one other person worth watching," added Paul, after a pause.

"Who is that?"

"The ranch overseer, Philip Warburton."

This was a gratuitous insult to an honest man, and arose only from Paul's hatred of his rival.

"Why should he want the cipher?" asked Mr. Neat.

"He don't like me. He is a careless, inattentive employee, and I have been obliged to call my father's attention to him. Of course he would like to be revenged."

The detective's gaze wandered out of the window again, hovered there a moment and then came back again to Paul's face. Neat's regard then became painfully sharp.

"Mr. Nettleton, are you sure you are dealing frankly with me?" he asked.

"Certainly I am, sir. Why do you ask the question?"

"I can hardly believe that you would employ a detective, and pay five hundred dollars, to recover a secret cipher found among old rubbish, when you knew nothing of its nature and contents."

Paul's eyes fell before that incisive gaze.

"You should remember that no two men are alike. Each of us has his passion, peculiarity, pet fancy. Mine is for research, such as other men would laugh at, and I called Professor Hazlitt to my aid because I knew him to be interested in just such things."

"What did this missing parchment look like?"

"In shape, it was much like a sheet of writing-paper, of the size called 'fool's-cap.' Its color was a yellow; while the characters on it were nearly white, having probably faded from the original color."

"Have you a copy?"

"More fools we, we made none."

"Do all the servants know of the theft?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Let me see the Indian woman."

Paul went out, and soon returned accompanied by Loyola. She was as calm as Mr. Neat, himself, and in the few seconds he devoted to silently studying her, he came to the conclusion that she was no ordinary person. Her manner, however, was respectful, and free from both fear and defiance.

"Loyola," said Mr. Neat, quietly, "I suppose you have heard that Mr. Nettleton has missed a parchment."

"I knew something was gone; me not know what."

She answered calmly, mixing good English with bad, according to her usual custom.

"Do you know what parchment is?"

"Skins made to mark on."

"Exactly. Well, when you saw this parchment here, before it disappeared, did you notice it enough to recognize it if you were to see it again?"

"I never saw it here, senor."

"No? Where did you see it?"

"Nowhere, senor. I did not know Master Paul had any such thing."

"Did you notice what was lying on this table last night?"

"I was not here last night. Rosa, she look after rooms; I work below, in kitchen."

"Do you not do any work here?"

"No work, senor. Rosa, she work in chamber."

"Did she work here last evening?"

"Don't know, senor. Me not up-stairs in evening, nor yesserday."

"Who told you something was missing?"

"Mrs. Drake—housekeeper. She tells Rosa and me."

"Did you ever see the key to that drawer?"

"Yes, senor."

"When?"

"In Frisco—here. It has always been in the drawer just like as now."

"Always?"

"Yes, senor."

"It was, until I came," said Paul, in a low voice, to the detective. "Since then it has never left my possession."

"Is there a locksmith near here, or any one who could make a key from a model, or an impression?"

"Not to my knowledge."

Neat meditated for a moment, and then turned again to the Indian woman.

"Loyola, how long has it been since this drawer has been in such condition that it could not be securely locked?"

The question seemed to puzzle her, and he had to repeat it before obtaining a direct answer. She then said that she had never tried it, or given thought to the matter. She furthermore stated that she did not remember being in the room but once since Paul came home, and she had not then noticed whether the key was in its place. She did not know that he had anything of especial interest, or value, in the room.

Paul was impatient to have her directly ac-

cused of theft, but Mr. Neat did nothing of the kind. He told her to go and send in Mrs. Drake, the housekeeper.

When she went out Paul demurred, but Neat turned on him and decisively said:

"Mr. Nettleton, if I work for you at all, you must allow me to manage my own case. Loyola may be guilty, but she impresses me as an innocent woman. At any rate, we might as well try to frighten the Pacific Ocean as her. If she is guilty, we must prove it by stratagem, or evidence not as yet discovered."

Mrs. Drake came. Like the majority of women in her position, she claimed to have "seen better days," and that the heart of a gentlewoman still beat in her bosom. Likewise, she was devoted to her employers' interests, and very much startled and shocked to hear that robbery had been committed in Coast Castle.

Her examination elicited nothing. Until told by Mr. Neat she did not know what was missing. The main object in questioning her fell flat. She had told Loyola and Rosa that something was missing, but had been too much shocked, herself, to notice how they had received the news.

She was dismissed and Rosa came. She was a neat, comely little maid of the lower walk in life, and though she had managed with her rosy cheeks, and brilliant eyes, to make Tim Welch and Joseph Jigson heartily hate each other for her sake, she was always timid when trouble was abroad.

Mr. Neat's cold, sharp eyes now thoroughly upset her, but she gave satisfactory testimony. On being asked about the morning revelation of Mrs. Drake, concerning the robbery, she said she "had that horror of robbers that her heart just jumped into her mouth," and she had not looked at Loyola at all.

She was dismissed.

The men servants, Welch and Jigson, were called, though as one was coachman and the other gardener, it was hardly expected there would be anything learned from them. The only hope was that they had seen suspicious persons lurking around the previous evening.

Nothing was learned from Welch.

Jigson was an Englishman with a red face and "mutton-chop" whiskers, and a ponderous body which was astonishingly developed around the waist.

Asked if he had seen any one lurking around Coast Castle, he replied:

"Hundreds of them. There are more vagabonds harround 'ere than hany other place I was hever in."

"Whom have you seen?"

"Greasers, Injuns and the like."

"Indians."

"Yes."

"Who were they?"

"Hoh! I see them 'most every day. The 'alf-breed, Garth Griffith, his halways hat it. Then there's the big Injun they call Red Jaguar."

"Did you see any of them last night?"

"No, sir."

"Mr. Jigson, pretty girls usually have lovers."

"Hi 's a fact, sir."

"Has Rosa Strong a love?"

Joseph's red face became almost scarlet.

"Hit is possible she 'ave, sir."

"Jigson and Welch are both her lovers," put in Paul. "What Mr. Neat means is, has she other lovers?"

"Gracious 'evings, hain't two hanuff?"

"Answer the question."

Mr. Neat's gentle voice came in after Paul's sharp, imperious tones, saying:

"Yes, Joseph, what we want is to know if Rosa has a lover besides you and Welch."

"Not that I know hof, sir."

"Of course, Mrs. Drake has none?"

"I should say not, sir. Ha man would sooner take Loyola. Which reminds me, I think Loyola has ha lover."

"Indeed! Who is he?"

"Red Jaguar, the Injun chief."

"Why do you think so?"

"I saw her meet 'im by night, not long hago."

Paul here came to the front with impetuosity.

"When was this, Jigson?"

"Three or four nights hago, sir."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain, sir."

Paul was now all anxiety, eagerness and excitement; so much so that Mr. Neat looked at him in wonder. He asked Joseph to explain, but the gardener only knew that he had seen Loyola glide out of the house at a late hour, and meet Red Jaguar. He thought it none of his business and did not follow them, so he could tell no more.

But Paul turned on Neat with an animated face.

"This settles the whole matter, and makes it as clear as day. Loyola and Red Jaguar are, beyond question, those who committed the robbery!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

PERPLEXITIES MULTIPLY.

DETECTIVE NEAT sighed in a very melancholy way before answering.

"Allow me to ask why you consider the matter settled, Mr. Nettleton," he said, quietly.

"Why, you see they are both Indians, and—" Paul suddenly paused and remained silent.

"And what?" the detective asked.

"Why, if one was in mischief, the other would naturally be in mischief, too."

"Your argument is so ingenious that I can't well combat it, Mr. Nettleton, and now that I think of it, I remember that the North American has always been famous for interest in ciphers, algebraic problems and the conundrums of Euclid."

Paul flushed slightly. The sarcasm of the last few sentences was not to be mistaken.

"At least, you will admit that they are a bad lot."

"Some of them are. Mr. Nettleton, may I ask you to accompany Jigson, and officially locate the exact spot where the two Indians met, while I continue my work here?"

Paul readily agreed, and he and Joseph went out.

"By the way, Professor Hazlitt," said Mr. Neat, almost lazily, "where did I understand you to live?"

"For the last year I have been in San Francisco."

"Ha! I thought I had seen you there," said the detective, though he thought nothing of the kind. "Haven't I seen you with Mr. Nettleton? I mean Mr. Paul Nettleton."

"I never saw him until a week ago."

"It must be I was mistaken then. How do you like Clifftown and vicinity?"

"I have hardly looked around me once, but there is little here to interest me."

"Odd that you have decided to settle here permanently."

"I have not so decided. I am here to stop only a short time."

"Oh! I believe Mr. Nettleton did say that you came down solely to study the cipher with him."

"Such was my object."

Hazlitt looked a trifle annoyed as soon as he made this admission, but Mr. Neat went on to speak of Commodore Nick, and his long service in the United States Navy, showing a slight enthusiasm which somewhat dissipated his melancholy. It also quieted any suspicion the professor might have had, but he had already been "pumped dry" by the adroit detective.

Paul soon returned, and then Mr. Neat expressed a fear that listeners might try to overhear their conversation. Would Professor Hazlitt kindly oblige him by patrolling the hall while he summed up the case with Mr. Nettleton?

The professor would and did, and Neat went over the ground. He gave no definite opinion, but delighted Paul by throwing out dark hints concerning Loyola, Red Jaguar and Philip Warburton. Paul made the most of the fact that the overseer and Red Jaguar had been seen together, and Mr. Neat said it looked suspicious, very suspicious.

"By the way," the detective added, in his softest voice, "of course your friend, Professor Hazlitt, is above suspicion? You and he are in perfect accord, eh?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Have you known him intimately long?"

"Oh! yes, for five years."

"Does he intend to locate near here, or is this only a friendly visit to you?"

"The latter; that's all."

"I suppose," and here Mr. Neat actually smiled beamingly, "that you decoyed him down here with talk of friendship, and then suprised him with a sight of the cipher?"

"Exactly."

Paul swallowed the bait, hook and all, making a mental note to the effect that he would speak to Hazlitt and have this fact understood.

Mr. Neat pursued the point no further. From the first he had seen that he was engaged in a complicated case. Not only were all the other members of the family against Paul and Hazlitt, but Paul was obliging him to work in the dark, and was deceiving him on several points.

He had now trapped his two associates in the game into flatly contradicting each other. Paul said he had intimately known the professor five years; Hazlitt said they had never met until a week before. Paul said the professor came down on a friendly visit; Hazlitt said he came especially, and solely, to study on the cipher.

The detective was not in the habit of working on cases where his employers deliberately deceived him, if he knew it, but he had once vainly accused Paul of double dealing, and having become unusually interested in the yellow parchment, he determined to go on and see what he could make of it.

His next step was to learn why Paul's relatives were all against him in the matter, and, without intimating that they were thus, he received the younger man's explanation. They were angry because he shut himself up with the professor, and the parchment, and neglected the rest of the household.

A veiled attempt to secure an admission that the parchment was of value to any one, pecuniary or otherwise, utterly failed. Paul persisted that, as far as he knew, it was of value to no one. He was also doggedly determined to have Loyola and Red Jaguar to the front as the

thieves, though he would give no explanation of the strange fact that two Indians should desire to possess a mere cipher.

Having obtained permission to make himself free about the house, Neat strolled around alone and carelessly talked with the servants.

From Mrs. Drake he learned that every one had been much perplexed to know what Paul and Hazlitt were doing in the east room; that all the other people had commented on their strange actions; and that the rumor had been afloat that they had diamonds there which Paul had found in Brazil, and on which the professor was fixing a value.

Mr. Neat studied on this point. Had there been diamonds, and was the story of the yellow parchment all a fiction? It did not seem reasonable; if the robbery was one of diamonds, surely Paul would, or ought, take a different course.

The detective found and interviewed Commodore Nick in his usual roundabout way.

The ex-mariner put little restraint on his tongue, and Neat was allowed to see that the father was disappointed in his son. He could not learn, however, that there was any further trouble about the son's secret occupation than that the commodore resented the secrecy of the affair—the frequent, long interviews behind locked doors.

Of one thing Neat now felt sure.

Paul had said that he found the "secret cipher" in a mass of waste paper, in San Francisco, and had no knowledge of its contents. This was given the lie by every event connected with it.

First, Hazlitt would not have journeyed so far to indulge in occupation fit only for a boy. He might have had a copy sent him, if the matter was so unimportant.

Secondly, when the two men pored over the parchment, they did so with doors locked and curtains lowered. This showed the need of secrecy.

Thirdly, Paul had been womanishly anxious to have the house secured every night; had himself looked to every door and window; yet he had often slept on the ground where wild beasts and wild men roamed, with no guard or protection. Clearly, the parchment, or whatever had been there, had great value to him, monetary or otherwise.

A possible solution of all this occurred to Mr. Neat in this form:

Possibly Paul desired to have people think he had been robbed of something which he still had; in other words, that the robbery was a pretense, and all the singular events of the last few days only so much prearranged evidence leading up to it, and calculated as a blind.

This was worth studying, but the detective did not intend to leap to a settled conclusion at once.

He wandered out of the house, and, chancing upon Philip Warburton, held a somewhat lengthy conversation with him. Not once intimating that Paul had spoken suspiciously of him, he talked with the young man about the ranch and other matters, barely referring to the robbery, and then wandered into the garden where Joseph Jigson was at work.

At his request the corpulent Englishman showed him the place where he had seen Loyola meet Red Jaguar.

Neat's work had taken him everywhere, and made him a fair trailer, and as the soil was light at this point, he was able to follow the chief's trail several rods.

Then it became lost in the harder soil of the ridge, but Mr. Neat went on, hoping to recover it, until he suddenly came upon a young man who lay on the ground, in an open space between the bushes, reading a book.

Each looked at the other, and then the young man resumed reading.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself, friend," said Neat.

"Madly so," was the careless reply.

"Then you must have an exciting book?"

"Milton's 'Paradise Lost,' and, do you know? when I saw you scanning the ground so closely, it struck me you might be trying to find it."

With this absurd speech the young man sat erect, while Neat looked at him with more than ordinary interest.

"Judging by your proximity to Coast Castle you may be searching for Paradise, with a pretty clear idea how to find it."

"Which refers to the young ladies, I suppose? You have seen them, yet you are a stranger. Possibly you are a detective, come to solve the mystery of young Nettleton's irreparable loss?"

"Irreparable?"

"Great loss, I should say."

"Do you live near here?"

The young man pointed to the ruined convent.

"Behold my palatial abode!"

"Ah! So you are Frazer Hot Heart, the Fire-Eater?"

"So called."

"You don't look exactly like a furious and bloodthirsty bravo, I must say."

"I am a man of two moods, like an April day. Use me well, and I am as harmless as man can be. Misuse me, and the sparks fly.

"To change the subject, have you found the lost—"

"Lost what?"

"That's the question. I was waiting for you to fill the blank. It is common news that there has been a robbery at Coast Castle, but no one seems to know what is gone."

"Possible?"

"Quite."

Neat remained looking in silence at the Fire-Eater several seconds, while the latter, finding his question disregarded, looked off quickly toward the western sky. The detective was evidently interested in his companion, and he finally spoke again:

"Are you well acquainted about Coast Castle and its vicinity, Mr. Hot Heart?"

"Tolerably so."

"Do you know where Red Jaguar, the Indian chief, makes his home?"

"No. What do you want of him? Does Paul Nettleton think the chief has stolen his treasure? If he has, Paul will never see it again."

"Why not?"

"A fancy of mine."

"But why did you arrive at the conclusion that Paul suspects Red Jaguar?"

"Why are you at Coast Castle? You can have but one motive for wishing to find the chief."

"What should the chief want of the missing article?"

"How the dickens do I know? You haven't even told me what is lost. Come, Sir Detective, don't look at me with such a suspicious eye. What have I done to your royal doubts?"

"Nothing, Mr. Hot Heart. On the contrary, I want your aid. I want you to help me find Red Jaguar. I admit that the man is suspected, though the grounds for suspicion are very slight. Like you, I am not sure just what I am hunting for, but Paul suspects the Indian, and I want to find him."

"I doubt if you do."

"Why so?"

"Because, if Paul's idea is correct, Red Jaguar is before now gone from this neighborhood, and your employer will never see his lost treasure again. You can depend upon that."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MYSTERY OF ROSA.

"I DON'T understand," said the detective slowly. "What does Red Jaguar want of the missing article?"

"You've already asked the question once, and I told you I knew nothing about it."

"Excuse me, Mr. Hot Heart, but I believe you suspect a good deal. You think that you know what is missing, and that is why you intimate that if Red Jaguar has got it, he has probably cleared out of the country in hot haste. Now, if you will share your suspicion with me, I shall be deeply indebted to you."

Hot Heart laughed lightly.

"I advise you to go to your employer for information. He is the proper man, and, Great Scott! sir, you must be engaged in wretched business if the man you work for is ashamed to tell you what you are to hunt for."

For the first time since he came into the case, detective Neat's face assumed an angry expression.

"Mr. Hot Heart," he said curtly, "it is now in your power to make me your friend or your enemy. Which shall it be?"

"Upon my word!" the Fire-Eater retorted, "you are using remarkable language. I don't care a picayune which you are, but I swear I can't see why you light on one in this way. I am not in the confidence of either Nettleton or Red Jaguar, and do not even know that robbery has been done. Simply because you suspect that I suspect something about the matter, isn't it going in just a trifle strong to threaten me with your enmity?"

"Nonsense! Don't make a mountain of a mole-hill. You are a man, Hot Heart, whom I would like associated with me in this work—"

"Thank you, but I want no part of Paul Nettleton in mine. I'd not raise a hand to recover his lost treasure."

"You don't seem to like him."

"I don't."

"And you decline to help me find Red Jaguar?"

"Yes, sir."

"That is enough."

Mr. Neat turned on his heel and walked away toward Nettleton's. Hot Heart looked after him with a smile.

"You may as well go your way, sir, if Red Jaguar and Loyola have the lost treasure. I told Paul he would find a heap of fun in the Indian woman. His suspicions have evidently turned to her, yet—it's odd she did not at once flee from Coast Castle, if she has taken it."

The detective returned to Paul and asked for a man to guide him to Red Jaguar. Who could be obtained? The first person in Paul's mind was Garth Griffith, the Bush-Wolf, but the latter was quite as hard to find as Red Jaguar. Such being the case, he could think of no better way than for them to enlist Tim Welch, and strike out at random, hoping to find either the chief or the Bush-Wolf.

This they did, but with wretched success.

Neat was always zealous about his work, and this zeal impelled them to pursue their search as far as the top of Porcupine Ridge—Paul remembered that Red Jaguar had been there when he so opportunely saved Barbara—and as none of the three was acquainted with the mountain, they were belated and overtaken by night, became confused, spent several hours wandering about, and did not reach Coast Castle until ten o'clock.

By that time they were extremely weary, and, finding no one except Professor Hazlitt up to hear their report of failure, all were soon abed.

Mr. Neat, at least, slept soundly.

He could find no great fault with his welcome in the morning; Commodore Nettleton and the young ladies were too well-bred to deliberately insult any one they allowed in their house; and the ex-mariner actually ventured on a few grim jokes about the "Pernicians and Cartilagians."

Mr. Neat noticed that several calls were made for Rosa, the housemaid, who was also table-girl; but she did not appear, and no one had seen her that morning.

Mrs. Drake was obliged to wait on the table.

When the meal was ended, and the girl still missing, inquiries for her became more emphatic. On the part of Barbara and Leona they were anxious, too. The girl had evidently occupied her chamber a portion of the night, but now she was gone, and nobody could explain where or why.

When it became fully settled that she was gone, Mr. Neat grew deeply interested. He had often noticed that when he began work on a case somebody was liable to disappear mysteriously; and in nine cases out of ten, the sequel proved that that person had possessed important knowledge of the case.

He proceeded to question those who had seen Rosa the previous evening, and gained his first information from Miss Nettleton.

She now remembered, though she had given the matter but little attention then, that the girl had been strangely awkward when doing some work for her during the evening. She had commented on the subject and received some casual reply which she did not remember.

Mrs. Drake, on being interviewed, told a more suggestive story.

"Rosa was nervous," she said, "and I had to reprove her for the way she did her work."

"Don't scold, Mrs. Drake," says she, "for I'm not feeling well to-night."

"What's the trouble?" says I.

"My nerves seem a' unstrung," says she.

"No wonder," says I, "when things have become so unsettled at Coast Castle that there is a robbery, and we have to have a detective living right with us."

"Upon this Rosa turned short around, and I saw that her eyes looked kind of wild and unsettled."

"Will he stay long, Mrs. Drake?" says she.

"Until he catches the thief, I suppose," says I.

"What will be done with him, when he is caught?" she asked, sort of eager like.

"Well," says I, "I am not versed in law matters, but I should say it would be imprisonment for life. Sometimes robbers only get forty or or fifty years, but a robbery at Coast Castle is quite an extraordinary affair. It would probably be life, without any ticket-to-leave." Did I state the law right, Mr. Neat?

"Admirably, Mrs. Drake. Well, what did Rosa say to that?"

"Now you recall it, I think she turned pale, and I do know them—those eyes of hers were big as saucers."

"But what if it was a woman, Mrs. Drake?" says she. "It may have been a woman, or a boy, mayn't it, ma'am?"

"I knew then that she was thinking of Loyola, for she and I had privately talked about the Indian; and I replied that if 'twas a woman she might get a life-sentence, or possibly let off with a flogging."

"And what next, Mrs. Drake?"

"That's all that was said. Rosa caught up a dish and went to the dining-room with it, and we said no more on the subject."

"This was just before supper?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you talk with Rosa at all afterwards?"

"Only casually, about our work, sir."

"Did she become calm, or not?"

"She was nervous all the evening, but, law! sir, so was I. This affair of the robbery has upset us all."

The housekeeper had no more to say, and Neat interviewed Loyola. Here he met with no success, whatever. She said she had noticed nothing peculiar; had paid no attention to what the other women said; and could throw no light on Rosa's case.

Next, the detective saw Joseph Jigson.

The corpulent gardener had seen Rosa during the evening. He was not at first inclined to speak out, which looked suspicious until Neat had developed the fact that he tried to improve Tim Welch's absence and press his love-suit, only to be foiled.

"I could not get Rosa's mind upon the subject," he admitted. "She was nervous, hand inclined to talk about minor matters. She asked me about Bill Peters, who was drowned in Nigger's Harm, and asked me if heffort's 'ad been made to find the body. I told 'er that the commodore 'ad 'ad men dragging the inlet for two days, but that nobody 'ad been found."

"What next, Mr. Jigson?"

"Why, sir, she wanted to know if ha body was likely to be found there bif there was one, or bif the tide would take it hout to sea."

"Well?"

"I told 'er hit was the hopinion that ha body would not go hout to sea, and that it was very 'ard finding what Nigger Harm took, sir."

"How did she receive this information?"

"She said hit was sad that Mr. Peters 'ad been drowned, but perhaps 'e was better hoff in Nigger Harm than hanywhere helse, sir."

"You say she was nervous at this time?"

"Well, uneasy, at least, Mr. Neat."

This was all Joseph could tell, but, taken in connection with Mrs. Drake's story, it suggested a very startling theory. Rosa had been nervous; perhaps frightened; and had questioned the housekeeper as to what would be done with the robber when found, especially with reference to a female robber. Shortly after this she had asked those suggestive questions of Joseph Jigson.

It looked like a case of guilt and suicide.

Almost any one would say, at first thought, that Rosa had been the thief, and that, alarmed at the consequences, she had now gone and drowned herself in the waters of Nigger Arm.

Mr. Neat saw which way the evidence pointed, and felt sure that he had struck a lead. It only increased the mystery, however. He did not regard Rosa as a dishonest girl, and even if she had been, why had she stolen the yellow parchment? Miss Nettleton's jewels were where she could at any time have taken them, yet they were not molested.

Then why had she taken the parchment?

There were but two ways of answering the question: either Paul had spoken falsely as to the nature of the lost article, or else, if Rosa was really the thief, there was more to the matter than the detective yet knew.

Rosa had been well liked as a servant; her position had been well filled and, in return, had been made pleasant for her. Even Paul spoke well of her. She had no revenge to gratify, and as the parchment was valueless to her, she would never have taken it from any personal motive.

"If she was the thief, she acted as agent for somebody else, and there is a drama back of it," thought Mr. Neat. "Now, who could have been her ally? Common sense and my experience teach me that Rosa may have had a lover. She had two known lovers—Welch and Jigson—but I'll wager something she didn't care a picayune for either. They are coarse and awkward; she is, or was, a very trim little soul, servant or not. Query: Had she another lover who tempted her to steal the parchment? and, if so, who is he?"

While thus soliloquizing the detective had half-unconsciously been walking along the south road, led, perhaps, by instinct to go toward where he supposed Rosa had gone—to Nigger Arm—but he was suddenly brought to a standstill by sight of Convent Rest. Nor was this all. Frazer Hot Heart was visible at the window, calmly smoking.

Mr. Neat at once became on the alert.

Here was a man who lived on the very road Rosa probably took if she went to drown herself.

Might he not have seen her pass?

Led by this mental question, the detective promptly entered the building, ascended the winding stairs and stood in the Fire-Eater's peculiar abode.

Hot Heart did not rise, but moved one hand toward an extra chair.

"You can sit down if you want to," he languidly observed, still smoking.

"I certainly do, Mr. Hot Heart. I have come to see you on business. Can you tell me where Rosa Strong is?"

He watched the effect of his words keenly, but not a muscle of Frazer's face lost its easy indifference.

"Who the dickens is Rosa Strong?" he indolently asked.

CHAPTER XXV.

ADDITIONAL TROUBLE FOR PAUL.

"ROSE STRONG," the detective replied, "is one of the force of servants at Coast Castle. At least she was, until she mysteriously disappeared last night."

Frazer removed his pipe and laughed.

"What!" he said, "another mystery at Nettleton's? Upon my word, they are getting sensational. So Rosa has skipped. Who does Paul think stole her?"

"I think her lover ought to answer that."

It was only a random shot, put in a general way, but Neat watched to see the result. The Fire-Eater remained as indifferent as ever.

"So she had a lover? Foolish girl! Now, indeed, you touch my heart. I pity her!"

"Sir," said the detective, sharply, "I beg that you will abandon this light manner. We have reason to believe the unhappy girl has drowned herself in Nigger Arm."

Hot Heart became serious in a moment.

"I beg your pardon, sir; I did not suppose it was anything like that. Why do you think she is drowned?"

"It is all along of that wretched mystery at Coast Castle. If my suspicion is correct, she probably passed here some time after eight o'clock last night. Did you see any woman pass?"

"No."

"And you can throw no light on the subject?"

"None whatever. By the way, you connect her with the mystery of Coast Castle. Do I understand you to intimate that, if she has drowned her elf, it is a direct result of the Coast Castle robbery?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you are wrong."

"You speak positively."

"Yes."

"What other motive could she have for drowning herself?"

"I haven't the ghost of an idea, but you can bet she had no part in the robbery."

"Mr. Hot Heart, you owe it to your good name to tell me what you know about the object of that robbery, and the nature of the article stolen. You take no trouble to hide the fact that you know all this, and if you do not explain, you may give birth to the suspicion that you know all about the actual theft."

"I have no fear of being implicated in it," Frazer coolly replied. "As for telling you what was stolen, I decline to state my opinion. That is the place of Paul Nettleton. More fool he, if he don't speak plainly to you—more fool you if you work on the case in the dark. Young Nettleton knows very well who committed the theft, and why it was done."

"He says it was done by Loyola and Red Jaguar."

"Well?"

"What could they want of—of what is missing?"

"Ask your employer."

"Loyola is from Mexico; Red Jaguar is a Californian Indian. What interest have they in common?"

"Ask your employer."

"I am asking you."

"And throwing away a good deal of breath. I don't love Paul well enough to help him recover his lost treasure. On the contrary, I ought to flog him."

"You would, were it not for his sister."

Frazer's eyes suddenly sparkled.

"Excuse me," he said, frigidly, "but I see no need of dragging a lady's name into the discussion."

"I merely wanted to let you see that I am not blind," Mr. Neat dryly replied. "Well, Hot Heart, if time pulls you and me by the ears, pray remember that I have twice requested you to be my friend and ally."

There was a significance in the last sentence which Frazer could not avoid noticing, but he disregarded it. As his visitor arose, he asked where the detective was going.

"To Nigger Arm, to search for signs of Rosa."

"With your permission, I will accompany you."

Neat did not object, and they walked down to the water together.

Hot Heart evinced a desire to get particulars in regard to Rosa, but it was the detective's turn to be non-committal, and he would not satisfy his companion's curiosity fully.

They searched thoroughly for the girl's footprints, but found no sign whatever. The waters of the dark inlet rippled with unusual placidity, and told no tale.

Midway toward Clifftown, three boats' crews were dragging the ocean-arm for Bill Peters's body, but without success.

"It's odd," remarked the Fire-Eater, "how those who have anything to do with Paul Nettleton gravitate toward Nigger Arm when a grave is needed."

Once more Mr. Neat thought his companion's manner significant, and he slowly observed:

"Perhaps you can explain Peters's death."

"You had better ask your employer," dryly replied Frazer.

The detective did not answer, but stood looking at the men in the boats, thoughtfully. He was hemmed in with mystery in his latest case, and there were other mysteries about Coast Castle. He had heard all that people in general knew about Bill Peters's case; he was aware that Commodore Nettleton had declared that the missing man was too good a sailor to be drowned in Nigger Arm; and Hot Heart's last words brought up vague doubts and speculations in his mind.

He turned abruptly away from the water.

"I think I will go back to Coast Castle," he said, curtly.

Hot Heart accompanied him as far as the

ruined convent, but not a word passed between them. Neat's manner had grown frigid, and the Fire-Eater was wholly indifferent.

As he entered the Nettleton grounds the detective came suddenly upon Paul, and he determined to mention an idea that had occurred to him. He mentioned his unavailing visit to Nigger Arm, and then added:

"I saw that the dragging for Bill Peters's body was going on. Three boats were out and at work."

"Zealously?"

"Well, I can't say as to that."

"I shall increase the reward offered. I must find Bill's body, if such a thing is possible."

"He was your servant for a long time, I believe?"

"Six years."

"Continuously?"

"Yes."

"And well known to your father before that?"

"Yes."

"Likewise, a trusted servant?"

"Yes, sir. Peters was a rough, uneducated man, but he was a jewel; an honest, faithful man."

"Humph! Did he know you possessed the secret cipher?"

For a reason best known to himself, Paul's blood seemed to grow cold. Why did Neat want to know about Peters? Paul felt a cold perspiration gathering on his forehead, and was painfully suspicious that conscious guilt was expressed on his face. He tried to answer indifferently, naturally.

"Oh! no; he never heard of the cipher. To him it would have seemed child's play. He was no cryptographer."

"Was there no way by which he could have learned of the secret paper?"

"None whatever."

"Are you sure he was drowned in Nigger Arm?"

Paul longed to throttle the man who asked these ugly questions, and felt himself treading close to a precipice.

"There is no reasonable doubt in the case, that I can see. At the same time, I hope Bill escaped."

"Is it not possible that he learned of the secret paper and, believing it to be of financial value, determined to secure it; then concocted the scheme of making you think him drowned, lay around and finally stole the parchment?"

"I should pronounce it simply impossible. What gave you the idea, Mr. Neat?"

"Hot Heart suggested it."

Again Paul was terribly startled. He had not forgotten that the revolver with which he had shot Bill Peters had been found in Hot Heart's room; nor had he forgotten the mysterious reference to George Temple Bennett which so startled him on the day Barbara was rescued from Lopez, the Mexican; and he had been fearing that the Fire-Eater would do him harm.

It was with difficulty that he replied:

"What did Hot Heart say?"

"Well, his exact words have escaped me, and they were not so very important in themselves," Neat honestly answered, "but I gained the idea that there might be more in the Peters matter than was commonly known. In fact, that you might know something to prove that Peters was not drowned in Nigger Arm."

"I know nothing to that effect."

"And you really had confidence in Peters?"

"Implicit."

"What do you think of Hot Heart?"

"He's a scoundrel. There is no doubt in my mind but that he killed Palmer Hague."

"Why do you think so?"

"He, alone, had a motive, and the testimony on which he was released was far from convincing."

"Any other reason?"

"None, except his bad character."

Mr. Neat fell into deep thought, and Paul wandered away and left him. In truth, the detective was perplexed in more than one way, not the least of which was Palmer Hague's death. If Paul had been told that the San Francisco man had accepted his case merely as a cover under which to work a greater one, and that it was this which had brought him to Clifftown, the young man would have been surprised; yet such was the fact.

The detective had many things to occupy his attention, but as he usually won a case when he took hold of it, he was liable to make matters warm for somebody around Clifftown before he left.

He had already frightened Paul desperately.

The young man walked away with a white face, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"Hot Heart knows all, as sure as fate!" he thought. "His references to Bennett and Peters, prove that. But how did he get his information? Can it be that—"

A new expression of alarm passed over his face.

He believed he had shot Peters fatally, and he had certainly piled three feet of earth upon him, but, having heard of the resurrection of men from their graves, he was beset with a fear that Peters had been dug up by the Fire-Eater and brought back to life.

From that moment he was possessed of a mania to look into his former servant's grave, and make sure that the body was there; and as every moment of uncertainty was torture, he began to consider how he could do it at once.

He dared not go, even by night, when Hot Heart was in his room. No, Hot Heart must be decoyed out of the way. But how could it be done?

Paul studied on this point for hours, and finally concluded that the simplest way was the best.

So far as he knew, the Fire-Eater was on visiting terms with but one family in the vicinity. This family he had befriended by means of one of his fights, and they were so grateful that their repeated invitations obliged him to call there often. Acting on this knowledge Paul wrote a note in a disguised hand to Frazer informing him that if he would call at this house that evening he would hear something of interest to him, and the writer would see him between nine and eleven.

Knowing the Fire-Eater as he did, he felt sure this note would take him away from Convent Rest, and afford the desired privacy for the grave-digging affair. He sent it by a trustworthy boy, and then impatiently awaited the arrival of the appointed hour.

During the day nothing was found of Rosa, and Mr. Neat puzzled over his various mysteries in vain.

Early in the evening Paul left the family, went outside, secured a shovel, and went over to Convent Rest.

A light still burned there, but as nine o'clock had not arrived, Paul sat down to wait as patiently as possible. He was well rewarded. In due time the light disappeared, Frazer came out, mounted Jack Jet and rode away toward Clifftown at an easy pace.

He was hardly out of sight before Paul was inside the ruins, spade in hand, anxious to solve the question of whether Bill Peters rested in his grave. It was dangerous work, but it seemed better to the assassin to run the risk than to rest in doubt, uncertainty and fear. The grave must be opened.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BILL PETERS'S GRAVE.

PAUL believed that he was sure of two hours' time, but it would not be wise to waste any part of it. He promptly raised the flat stone he had placed over the grave. Both the stone and the ground beneath seemed as he had left them, and for a moment he hesitated and mentally assured himself that he need have no fear. But, no; he could not bear the suspense; he must know positively that his ex-servant was not alive and liable to strike back at him any moment.

He plunged the shovel into the earth and began the work.

Once begun, he prosecuted it feverishly. He had sent Hot Heart away, but he might return, or some one else chance along, and the most obtuse person would think this strange work for the heir of Coast Castle.

Driving the shovel deep into the soft earth, he flung it up rapidly.

The longer he worked the more he became convinced that the work was unnecessary; that all was as he had left it.

He had, however, begun, and now he must go on and settle the matter. If he was not discovered—ah! that was the rub!—if not discovered, all would be well.

His zeal would have astonished a professional grave-digger, but, anon, his shovel began to lag. He had gone well down, and the lone occupant of the grave would soon be exposed. Then—then—Paul shivered as he thought of it, and his spade moved even more slowly.

Crime was no stranger to him, but though hardened to the taking of human life, he was not so to the accusing, though silent, voice of death. He dreaded to look upon the white face which had been for days confined in that abode of death. Slower still became the strokes of his shovel; they ceased entirely and he leaned against the side of the grave, trembling from causes not purely physical.

Horrors like that he had never before felt.

Suddenly he aroused, such weakness would never do; his work was almost done and must be finished.

Again he thrust down the spade; this time slowly, for he felt that he was liable to touch the senseless shape which had once been a man.

What really happened astonished and dismayed him.

The shovel went through the earth without effort, as though into a hollow space, and then down went Paul, also. He dropped only a foot or so, but it was enough to frighten him terribly, though vaguely, and he bounded out of the grave.

A moment sufficed to dispel this fear, but another and more tangible one rushed upon him. He went back, looked into the grave, descended. Then he leaned once more against the surrounding soil, weak as a child, but not with the fear of seeing Bill Peters's dead face.

The body was gone; the grave was empty!

Pale, weak and trembling, Paul Nettleton stood there while moments increased to minutes. His worst fears were realized, and the gallows seemed looming before him. Dead or alive, Bill Peters was gone from his grave, and *somebody* must have knowledge sufficient to overwhelm him who had fired the fatal shot.

His victim certainly had not escaped from the pit unaided, and whether Bill was alive or not, he who had disinterred him undoubtedly remained, and held a secret which he could use with fatal effect to Paul.

Chance had not led to the disinterment.

How long he stood there in silence Paul never knew. He was aroused by another peculiar circumstance. He had moved his shovel restlessly, as it stood in the grave, and it suddenly slipped from his loose hold and went down—down out of sight.

Then followed a rattling sound some distance below, as though it had struck upon stone.

Startled anew, he stooped and made an examination. There was a hole in the bottom of the grave, and though not large, it seemed easy to increase it. A loose, flat stone moved as he touched it. A ray of hope, which had no real foundation, came to the young man. There was vacant space below; was it possible that the body had slipped through without help?

It was a fragile hope, but he was in condition to catch at every straw. He resolved to know what was below.

Removing the flat stone, he found space sufficient to enable him to go down. He dropped a small stone. It fell only a few feet. Using great care he next lowered himself, clinging to the firmer stones which surrounded the place where the loose one had been.

His feet touched rock, and he released his hold. Almost in the same breath he lost his balance and fell at least three feet further. He scrambled to his feet, confused and alarmed. He was in total darkness, and the air about him was close and oppressive, though not damp.

After a few seconds his calmness partially returned. He believed that he was in a vault used by the inhabitants of the old convent, in its days of prosperity, and there was probably no cause for fear.

Striking a match, he found his theory confirmed. On all sides he was surrounded by ordinary stone walls, save that at one side a narrow door led to another part of the place. He glanced about, hoping to see Bill Peters's body, but there was nothing of the kind. Directly under the grave, however, was a pile of stones, upon which he had first stepped, and this seemed to indicate that they had been used by whoever removed the body.

A light of some sort would now have been a good thing, but he had nothing of the kind. This must not keep him from exploring, however.

He found the little door, passed through it, and along a passage four feet wide. He went, perhaps, twelve feet, and then came to a sudden stop.

Before him was a light, and beside it crouched a man. He was sitting with his back to the wall and his head almost touching his knees, and seemed asleep.

Paul gazed at him with feverish interest. Was this Bill Peters, dead or come to life? In the dim light he could not tell, and he advanced a few steps.

He thought his movements exceedingly cautious, but the unknown suddenly bounded to his feet.

The two stood facing each other, and Paul saw that his companion was no stranger—it was Garth Griffith, the Bush-Wolf.

Paul felt somewhat relieved, for he knew Garth to be a thorough rascal, but then and there he decided that the Bush-Wolf was the person who had taken away the body. Never before had he heard that there were vaults under the old ruins. Probably only Garth knew of their existence, but it was just like him to pry around and learn what honest eyes would never detect.

The Bush-Wolf looked startled, but his old manner soon returned, and he bowed and smiled most servilely.

"Senor, this is a most unexpected pleasure—" "What are you doing here?" Paul sharply interrupted.

"Senor, I was sleeping."

"Is this your home?"

"Senor, I am poor; a very poor, but honest, man; and I have to sleep where I can find a place. This is one of them."

"Take your lamp and show me around the vaults."

"Willingly, senor; I am pleased to oblige you."

Garth's manner was as humble and servile as ever, but Paul had felt for his revolver and was tempted to shoot him down where he was. Before then he had felt certain vague suspicions of the half-breed, and he now felt sure that he was the man who had disinterred Bill Peters. If so, he must never leave the vaults alive.

The circuit of the place was soon made; the rooms, one large and three small, were soon searched; but not a sign did Paul see of Peters, dead or alive.

They returned to the room where Garth had been sleeping.

"Set down your lamp!" ordered Paul.

The Bush-Wolf cheerfully obeyed.

"How long have you used this place as a home?"

"I found it only four days ago, senor."

"Don't lie!"

"Senor, I swear by St. Catherine that I speak the truth."

"How did you happen to find it then?"

"There is an iron door which opens into one corner of the ruins; some one, who had been here before me, did not cover up the door well, and I found the place."

"What did you find when you entered?"

"All was as it is now, senor."

"You will persist in lying, I see."

"Senor, I swear by—"

"Come with me!" interrupted Paul, sharply.

He led the Bush-Wolf to where he had entered, and pointed to the excavation.

"What have you to say to that?"

"*Caramba!* it looks like a grave, senor."

"Who was buried there?"

"*Madre de Dios!* I know not, senor."

Paul grasped his arm fiercely.

"Don't lie to me!" he exclaimed.

Garth protested vehemently, on the word of an honest man, that he was telling the truth; that he had never seen the excavation before, or anything to indicate that there was anything of the kind; and Paul, trying desperately to get at the truth, was led to believe him.

The Bush-Wolf swore that he had never suspected that there was a vault, or anything of the kind under the ruins until four days before, and that he then made the discovery exactly as before stated; and that he had only been there twice since. On neither occasion had he seen anything unusual or suspicious.

Paul believed, and began to be rather glad, of the two, that he had chanced upon the half-breed. He had wanted him to find Red Jaguar, and as he was a thorough rascal, he could be made useful in various ways.

Once more he settled back to the belief that Frazer Hot Heart was at the bottom of all the mischief; that he held his—Paul's—life in the hollow of his hand. He must be remembered. He was a very dangerous man.

Bill Peters's body was gone, and though his slayer had at the time felt sure he was shot dead, doubts and fears now began to rise. Suppose some one *had* been in the vault when the burial took place, and had taken the body downward. Would they have taken the trouble to move it away if life had been extinct?

The guilty man had feared Bill Peters, dead; he now began to fear Bill Peters, living.

And Hot Heart—ah! he was the cause of all the trouble, and his career must be brought to an end with a short jerk. It was his life or Paul's, and the latter did not intend to be the victim. He would strike speedily, too. Hiring Garth, they would at once invade Convent Rest and see if Peters was there, and then lay in ambush for the Fire-Eater and shoot him down on his return.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE BUSH-WOLF'S BARGAIN.

THIS point decided, Paul turned to Garth Griffith:

"You know Hot Heart, of course."

The Bush-Wolf shrugged his shoulders, received a twinge of pain from his still tender wounds, and admitted, with outward humility, that he did know him.

"Are you his friend?"

"Senor, I can't say that I am."

"Would you object to earning money by working against him?"

"No."

"Would it trouble your conscience to kill him?"

"Senor, I am an honest man, who believes not in what is sinful, but Hot Heart is a brawler and ruffian, and if your Honor thinks he ought to be killed, I think so too."

"Then let us enter his den."

"Ah!—a—senor, is it safe?"

Garth had not forgotten his previous experience, or the way in which the Fire-Eater could direct a whip. His back bore witness to Hot Heart's prowess.

"He is away, and will not return for two hours."

"Then I am at your disposal, senor."

They had started toward the iron door when Paul remembered the open grave. This was a sign which might tell disagreeable tales to any one, and the sooner it was refilled, the better. He mentioned his opinion to the Bush-Wolf, though without referring to it as a grave, and the latter agreed to fill it up in due form.

The offer was accepted, and while he worked Paul sat close by and meditated. Before that night he had looked upon Garth with fear. A wanderer of the night like him was not a safe man, and was liable at any time to learn too much. Yet, despite the last turn of the tide, Paul had decided that the Bush-Wolf was innocent.

No doubt it was Hot Heart who had done all the mischief. He had seen, or heard, Peters

shot; had found the revolver and the man, and rescued Peters from the grave. Probably the ex-servant was even then in Convent Rest, slowly recovering. But, no; he had surely been shot dead. And yet—

Paul was in a painful state of doubt and uncertainty, but he proposed to end it all as soon as possible. He would bind the Bush-Wolf to him—a stout, crafty rascal, who would shrink at no crime—and, by paying him well, make of him a powerful ally.

Probably Garth could easily find Red Jaguar, unless the latter had fled the State, and Paul did not believe he had.

The grave was duly refilled, and arranged to look as much like its old appearance as possible.

Then the younger man led the way to Convent Rest.

Garth was willing to be in the rear. He had a horror of Frazer Hot Heart, and though smarting for revenge, did Frazer full justice and realized that he was a very dangerous person to molest.

The Fire-Eater had not yet made his strange home impregnable, and they entered as Garth and Lopez had done on a former occasion—through one of the narrow windows of the lower story.

The Bush-Wolf's knowledge of the place now came in use, and though his heart was in his mouth, figuratively speaking, he led the way toward the winding stairs. Even the declaration of his companion that Hot Heart had ridden away toward Clifftown did not quiet Garth's fears of the terrible Fire-Eater.

He found the stairs and they ascended.

The trap-door was lowered, but not fastened. It was raised, and in a moment more they stood in the Fire-Eater's abode. A light was struck, and Paul looked about. There was little to reward his curiosity. The simply furnished room was soon surveyed, and no sign found of a sick, or dead, man.

They descended to the lower half.

This was certainly a bleak place for an invalid, but Paul peered about among the rubbish until satisfied that nothing was there. He did not tell Garth what he was looking for, and that discreet and honest man asked no questions, but all was done thoroughly.

"Now," said Paul, "the great question is: Is there a vault under this part of the convent?"

The Bush-Wolf shook his head.

"I see no sign of one."

"But the other was not visible."

"True, senor."

"I am convinced that there is such a place."

"Perhaps so, senor."

"Suppose we raise the flooring, and investigate?"

"Ah! but what if Hot Heart returns?"

"Are you afraid of him?"

"No."

"Then why talk so much about him?"

"Senor, my reputation is a priceless jewel, and if—"

"That will do. Garth, you are not a man of over-sensitive conscience. Could you be hired to put Hot Heart out of the way?"

"Speak plainly, senor."

"Bah! You understand well enough, and you carry knife and revolver. Will you use them?"

"My revolvers are poor, and money is needed to—"

"I understand. I will give you money when Frazer Hot Heart is dead. How much?"

"Say two hundred dollars, senor."

"I will give it."

"Then he shall die."

"It's a bargain!"

Paul gave his hand to the Bush-Wolf, but the latter's grasp was not a warm one. He had before been hired to kill the Fire-Eater, but in trying, he had come to grief, and the Hermit still lived and prospered. Garth now had a chance to earn double pay, but he was not at all sure he would earn anything. He had formed a superstitious estimate of the master of Convent Rest, and feared him accordingly.

"Now to work," said Paul. "Valuable time is passing, and we have none to spare. We will raise the stone floor, and try to discover another vault."

It was not hard to do this, and Garth again set to work with the shovel. He worked with a will, too. Despite Paul's confidence that they would not be molested, he had a strong impression that Hot Heart would descend on them and tear him, at least, to pieces. He knew, if Paul did not, what a terrible fellow the Fire-Eater was.

His energetic work soon made a good-sized opening in the ground, and Paul did not allow him to pause. Lower and lower he went, and higher grew the pile of earth thereby thrown up. Their hopes of finding a vault below a thin layer of earth faded away, and when Garth had made a pit three feet deep Paul bade him pause.

"We may as well give it up here, but we will try again over at that side."

"Senor, I am about played out."

"I will pay you for every minute you work."

"*Caramba!* I am a giant again."

The Bush-Wolf raised one foot to leave the pit, and then suddenly exclaimed:

"Listen!"

"I hear nothing."

"Carajo! I am sure I heard a horse's footsteps. Can it be that Hot Heart is back?"

"Hot Heart is here!"

The words came from the front of the building, and then a tall, light form sprung through one of the windows. The dreaded Fire-Eater was indeed there!

Garth Griffith uttered a yell of terror and sprung from the pit. His eyes were wild and enlarged, and he straightway turned his back on Frazer and ran. Then he accomplished a fine acrobatic feat. The windows were five feet above the floor, and narrow at that, but Garth fixed his gaze on one of them and, with a tremendous bound, shot through like a bird upon the wing. Another moment and his steps were heard in rapid retreat.

Paul did not run. If he could have veiled his identity by doing so he would have gone most gladly, but he knew that Frazer must have recognized him already, and he had pride enough to face his enemy boldly.

The Fire-Eater returned his regard with a careless smile.

"Hallo, Nettleton?" said he. "Glad to see you at Convent Rest, though the visit is unexpected. Have you waited long?"

"I have not waited."

"No?"

Paul glanced at the excavation, feeling that evasion would be useless in such a case, and then Hot Heart added:

"I see you have put in your spare time in muscle-raising. A good idea that—one does need exercise."

Still Paul did not answer. For once he was at a loss what to say. The impulse was strong to draw a revolver and settle the matter then and there, but Hot Heart had the reputation of being a desperate fighter and dead-shot, and Paul had due regard for his personal safety.

"Perhaps you've been digging for hidden treasure," added the Fire-Eater.

Nettleton breathed a sigh of relief. It was a blessed chance, at which he would not fail to grasp.

"To tell the truth, you have surmised the fact of the case. These old ruins have been attractive to me ever since I came home, and I am of the opinion that it is worth one's while to make a search for buried treasure."

"I never thought of it before, but it *does* look plausible. When the convent existed among the multitude of people then here, the monks must have done *something* with the immense fortune which overflowed their coffers."

Paul was crushed. He knew that at the time the convent had been in operation the region had been populated with only a bare sprinkling of Mexicans, and absolute poverty had undoubtedly forced the desertion of the convent.

"You forget possible ocean pirates."

"True. Captain Kidd and his men are as likely to have buried their colossal wealth here as on Long Island."

Paul flushed angrily. The cold sarcasm of his companion upset every point he advanced, and he curtly replied:

"Well, I haven't hurt your mansion, have I?"

"Hurt it? Bless you, no! And don't let me interrupt you. There's your shovel; go right on with your digging."

"I decline," was the angry reply. "Unless you have more to say to me, I will go home."

"I have a word more to put in edgeways. To come right down to hard-pan, what the blazes were you digging the senseless earth in the ribs for?"

"I have answered you once."

"Moonshine!"

"You are not compelled to believe me."

"Fortunately, I am not. Again, I don't like the companion of your toil. Garth Griffith, at least, had better keep away from here unless he wants to get hurt. I've a score to settle with that unhung knave one of these days, and, as reformation don't lurk in his bones, I shall tackle him at the first opportunity."

"I remember you are a fighter," sneered Nettleton.

"And liable to break out at any moment. All men take warning."

"Is that meant for me?"

"For you?" and Hot Heart's voice grew unusually grave. "Mr. Nettleton, I would much rather have no trouble with you, but let me say one word in earnest. I have no doubt but that you decoyed me away, to-night, to give you a clear swing here; though what your object was in digging me up, I don't know. Now, I don't like your style, and when you come again, please send a card in advance. That's all; and now, let us part friends."

Paul was willing to go, for for he felt hemmed in by circumstances and unable to speak without committing some blunder; so he shouldered his shovel, made his way to the door, somehow—he scarcely knew how—and finally found himself on the way home.

He went in a baffled, dazed and frightened mood.

He had not found Bill Peters, nor a vault under Convent Rest; but Peters's grave was empty, and he felt sure that Frazer Hot Heart could account for it.

He placed no dependence whatever in Frazer's alleged desire for peace and good will.

"He has the power to ruin me, and if he delays, it is only to make his blow more telling anon. Very likely he came here on purpose to be revenged on me for Bennett's sake. It is war to the knife between us, and I must urge Garth on to do his work."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE LION AROUSED.

THE following morning Paul and Detective Neat left the house shortly after breakfast, and it was understood that a guide had been obtained who was going to try to find Red Jaguar. Paul's repeated, and emphatic, declaration that the Indian had stolen the yellow parchment, had so far influenced Neat that he wished to see Red Jaguar and give him a chance to explain.

All fear that the chief had left the vicinity had been dissipated by the fact that a ranch-hand had seen him the previous day; and Paul proposed to enlist the Bush-Wolf and have the chief found.

Professor Hazlitt, lacking the physique necessary for such work, remained at home, wandered disconsolately about the house for awhile, and then shut himself up in his own room—probably, to brood over the loss of the parchment.

About the middle of the forenoon Don Esteban Villegas rode up the avenue, gave his horse to Tim Welch, and entered the house.

He asked to see Barbara, and she did not keep him waiting, though anything but pleased to see the man.

He had never looked worse. His complexion was a peculiar mixture of red, white and blue; his eyes were red and weak; and the hands which rested on his knees trembled perceptibly. Plainly, the alleged descendant of the old Spanish poet had been drinking something a good deal stronger than poetry, and to excess.

An expression of disgust passed over Barbara's face, but the Mexican made an effort to appear at his best, showing his will, if not power of execution. He had, however, come on definite business, and did not let much time go to waste.

"Miss Nettleton," said he, "I have called to see if we cannot appoint an early date for our marriage."

"Then I am afraid you will be disappointed."

"How so?"

"I am not disposed to 'appoint an early date.'"

"What difference does it make?"

"None; and that is why I do not propose to hurry."

"You evade the point. Now, Miss Nettleton, my house lacks a mistress, and I am anxious to see one settled there. You have practically agreed to marry me, and I see no reason for delay."

"I have once told you, Don Esteban, that I shall marry no one within the year following Palmer Hague's death."

"But it is generally known that you did not care for him."

"Is it? I acknowledge nobody's right to surmise as to that."

"Besides, Eastern form and flummery need not be observed in this part of the country."

"If you can find a wife who agrees with you, I will waive all claim."

"But I want you."

"Come to me a year hence and we will refer to the matter again, señor."

"Again," pursued Villegas, his eyes glittering with rising anger, "it is necessary that you guard yourself against the gathering suspicion that you were concerned in Palmer Hague's death. His widow, Zenobia, is still at Clifftown, and fairly thirsting for revenge on you. I have managed to see her, and gain somewhat of an influence over her, but she says I have no right to speak for you. If we were married, I would manage to get her back to San Francisco inside of a week."

Miss Nettleton's cheeks had grown flushed.

"I don't know which side of the question you intend to argue upon," she replied, "but you have certainly shown me a good reason why the marriage should not take place now. For me to marry at present would seemingly be to show that I was concerned in Mr. Hague's death."

"Not in the least."

"Then logic goes for nothing."

"But you have no one to fear here except Zenobia Hague, and I would get her out of the way."

"How do you happen to have such influence over her?"

"She is a peculiar woman, and I have played my points well."

"Very well indeed, I suspect."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that I suspect you have made her your cat's-paw, and are urging her on to perse-

cute me. You are anxious to hurry the marriage, and you think that if you spur her on to hate and annoy me, it will work to your good."

Don Esteban sat dumfounded.

This spirited accusation had covered the ground exactly, and his anger rose to a boiling pitch. He had relied a good deal on Zenobia, and to have his scheme thus penetrated was worse than annoying. Still, he could only affect innocence.

"Miss Nettleton!" he said, reproachfully.

"I have no faith in you."

"Tell me that after marriage," he sneered.

"I am not sure any marriage will take place."

"Ha! do you dare defy me?"

"I have not said so."

"You had better not. I don't want to speak harshly, but you know the *secret* I hold over your head. Do not compel me to use my knowledge!"

Miss Nettleton was very pale, but in her eyes was a dauntless light.

"You are at liberty to do as you choose," she replied.

"Caramba! this is bravado."

"You may have the power to ruin me, but I can, at least, take recourse to flight, and forever disappear from you and all others who know me."

"Ah! but your disgrace would kill your father!"

Barbara pressed her hand over her heart. The last shot had gone home, and she felt as though the weight of a mountain was upon her chest. She had the heroic nature of those who can bear trouble with outward calmness when it affects them alone, but she knew that Commodore Nick's heart was bound up in her. A blow at her would wound him more than one which affected him alone; he might never rally from it.

Villegas saw the result of his words, and waited with a half-smile for her to answer.

"What is your object in suddenly hurrying me?" she finally asked, in a voice as firm as ever.

"I told you my *casa* needed a mistress."

"That is not your object."

"Perhaps you will state it?" he sneered.

"I am indifferent."

"Miss Nettleton, enough of empty talk. Will you, or will you not, agree to a speedy marriage?"

"I will not."

"Beware!"

"I shall maintain the position I have taken. Come to me one year hence and we will talk; not before."

"Remember—"

"I remember *all*, and you have heard my ultimatum."

Don Esteban sat looking at her with a sullen scowl for several seconds, and then abruptly said:

"If you will loan me two thousand dollars, I will agree to wait the year."

"Ah!" cried the girl, "so you show your hand at last! You are short of money, and want me to help you. Well, sir, even here you will fail. I haven't one hundred dollars."

"Your diamonds are worth more than I named. Send them to San Francisco; have them replaced with imitations; and then give me the money I ask. This will be a great favor to me, and I will not ask you to marry me until the year is up."

"All is as plain as day. You are a spendthrift, and have run through your fortune. You want me and my money to bridge the chasm, and this is the cause of all your plotting."

"What of it? Half the people in the world marry for money, and you dare not refuse me."

"By the beard o' Neptune! she dares, and she will!"

It was a new voice which broke in like the roar of a lion, and both started to their feet. There in the open door stood Commodore Nettleton, his face white with wrath and his eyes blazing. Those who said that, as a sailor, he had been a terrible man in his wrath, had evidently been right.

He looked like a gale about to burst on a puny vessel.

"You miserable, black-skinned land-lubber!" he thundered, as though addressing a man at the fore-top, "how dare you show your ugly head in my house? I wonder that lightning don't strike you down where you are. Zounds! sir, do you know that that lady is my daughter?"

"Yes; and my promised wife," retorted Villegas, recovering from his momentary consternation.

"Scoundrel, you lie!" shouted the commodore.

"Take it back, or I'll fire you over the rail so quick you won't know what's hit ye!"

"Ask the lady herself."

"I know, oh, I know, you miserable snake! I've heard a part of this confab—too much for your good, for when a man threatens my gal he's got to eat crow for it. Bab, girl, tell him he's free!"

"Father—"

"Your heart ain't in it. Give him back all pledges you've made, and be hanged to him!"

"But, father, I—"

Barbara paused. What could she say? Don Esteban spoke the words which were on her tongue.

"She dares not."

"Dares not?" thundered Commodore Nick, taking another stride toward the Mexican. "By the heart of the Pacific, sir, I'll have you to understand that my daughter dares do anything. Bab, give him back his pledge, and, whatever hold he's got upon you, by the Lord Harry, we'll fight him till the brig goes to pieces under our feet!"

But still she sat silent. Ordinary danger she could defy, but she knew, if her father did not, what a sword of terror Don Esteban held over her head.

"Bab," said the commodore, sadly, "you don't answer me."

"Father, let us drop the subject now and avoid trouble."

"Aha! I told you so, señor," said Villegas.

"Told me what?"

"That she dared not throw me over."

"And do you say it now?"

"I do."

"Then, by the beard o' Neptune, I'll show you what I dare do! I'll chuck you out o' this cabin heels over head, you villainous shark!"

And Commodore Nick sprang upon the Mexican like an unchained lion.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE PROFESSOR'S STRANGE ADVENTURE.

DON ESTEBAN was anything but a coward, but this fierce assault startled him so that he sat like one turned to stone. Commodore Nick's strong grasp was upon him with a force that seemed almost capable of crushing his bones, but Barbara sprang forward and caught her father's hand.

"No, no," she cried. "Don't harm him. The man is not worthy of even that."

"He ain't worthy to sit in my house," retorted the veteran, but pausing at her command.

"Then send him away. Do not have it said that you had a brawl with him."

"There's times when brawls is enjoyable," declared the commodore, with more than his average independence of grammatical rules.

"You had better let me alone," put in Villegas.

"I had?"

"Yes."

"Now, don't you go to riling me, or even this bit of female loveliness won't save you."

"Better for you both if you make terms with me. I hold you and the Nettleton honor in the hollow of my hand. For Barbara's sake, you had better make terms."

"Bab, girl, what's this secret he prates about?"

"I can't tell."

She made the brief reply like one suffering keen pain, and it seemed to her that all the light had gone from life. She loved her father devotedly, and wished to keep all shadows away from his old age, and now the snake that sat there with the sneer upon his face had brought about the trouble she desired to avoid.

"It shall be just as you say," sturdily added the commodore, "but I want one thing clearly understood. No man can come to my house and annoy my daughter."

"Is it annoyance when an honest man asks for a wife?" demanded Don Esteban.

"Honest! Well, we won't argue that word, but this I do say: Bab's jewels won't be sold."

"Then let her marry me."

"Marry you, you scoundrel! You can bet your boots she won't do anything of the kind."

"Then I'll ruin you all!"

"You miserab'le, skulkin' scoundrel!" retorted the ex-mariner, in a voice like the subdued roar of a lion. "I don't know what keeps me from tearin' you all to pieces. You deserve it, and I've got the power to do it; but I s'pose it's a sort of respect for myself that holds me in. You see the door there, Don Esteban Villegas? Well, if you get out quick, you'll be all right."

Villegas rose.

"Am I to go as an enemy?" he asked, in a hard voice, his white teeth showing almost cannivorously between his lips.

"May the good Lord save us from seeing you go as our friend," said the veteran, fervently.

"You will repent this, señor."

"Eh? Do you threaten me?"

"I go as your enemy."

"Then why in thunder don't you go? Don't stand there all day talking about it."

Don Esteban moved toward the door, but paused and looked darkly at Barbara.

"Are you still stubborn?" he asked.

"That'll do!" cried Commodore Nick. "My daughter don't make terms with you, you can bet your life on that. Will you go, or shall I escort ye out by moral suasion?"

Grim as a human Gibraltar stood the commodore, and Villegas turned suddenly and went out. His heart was full of bitterness and revenge, but, though Nettleton was twice his years, he did not care to feel the grasp of those huge hands in anger. He went, but his heart

was like a seething fire, and he was silently swearing that both should bitterly repent what they had done.

Commodore Nick went to the window, but not until he saw him riding away did he speak. Then he turned to Miss Nettleton, who had sunk into a chair and sat with one hand shading her face.

"Bab, what is all this about?" he kindly asked.

"Don't ask me, father."

"Have I lost your confidence?"

"No; a thousand times, no; but you must humor me in this. Don't ask me to say a word; at least give me time to think."

"It shall be as you say, my girl."

She had risen, and as she moved forward he opened the door for her with unconscious grace. She paused, put her arms around his neck, kissed him and murmured:

"You are the best and noblest of fathers!"

And then she was gone.

"I'm groping in the dark," said the ex-mariner; "can't see an inch before me. It's a rocky coast, and I don't know which way the vessel is sailing. One thing is sure though, that p'ison snake of a Mexican can't cut up and howl around here. He had better go thundering slow, or something heavier than a belaying-pin will fall on him."

Whatever mischief Villegas meditated, he did not make his appearance again that day. Barbara imagined him at Clifftown, forming some new scheme with Zenobia Hague, and when she left her room and mingled with the rest of the household, her heart was heavy.

She was not so much bound up in her own troubles as to be oblivious to what was transpiring around her, and she noticed that Leona Erwin seemed to have caught the prevailing epidemic of trouble.

Before Paul's return Leona had been the lightest-hearted person in Coast Castle, and celebrated for her wit and mischievousness. Of late she had grown grave, and on this day, Barbara noticed that she looked very sad—almost frightened.

What shadow had fallen on her life?

Barbara knew how matters stood between her foster-sister and Paul; but the latter had thus far been too much interested in the yellow parchment to press his suit, or even address the other members of the household more than casually. Surely, her trouble could not be that he was hurrying her in the matter of the vague betrothal between them.

Why, then, was the shadow of trouble upon her face?

Barbara wondered, but as Leona's manner did not invite confidence, she did not refer to it.

Paul and Detective Neat returned late in the afternoon, weary and hungry. Under the guidance of the Bush-Wolf they had made a zealous but vain, search for Red Jaguar. He had generally been considered the chief of the Indian village to the southeast, but the red-men there denied that he was even one of them. He had been at their village, hunted and slept with them, and had been made welcome, but was not of their blood and they knew nothing about him.

They had advanced the opinion that his regular quarters were somewhere on Porcupine Ridge; they could, or would, tell no more. From a half-breed the searchers learned that the chief had been seen that morning, so he was still near the place.

But neither he nor the yellow parchment had been found.

Paul devoted some time after their return to refreshing himself, and then went to the door of Professor Hazlitt's room. It was locked. Paul knocked, but received no answer. He knocked again, but still no one bade him enter. He did, however, think that he heard a peculiar sound within, as of some one in distress. He called the professor's name, and the sound was repeated.

He now became really alarmed. Perhaps Hazlitt had been stricken with apoplexy, or something of the kind. He went at once to Mrs. Drake for her keys, secured them and returned to the door. Unlocking it, he entered.

The first thing of interest he noticed was that the room was in utter confusion. But there was something more.

On the bed lay Professor Hazlitt, bound hand and foot, tied to the bed, gagged, and with a bandage over his eyes.

Paul stopped and stared in utter amazement. He had thought of the learned man stricken with disease, but in such a strange plight as this, never. That he could have arranged himself thus was beyond the pale of possibility, but who, in the name of all that was wonderful, had thus tied him up, and how could it have been done in the sacred confines of Coast Castle?

One moment the younger man hesitated; then he strode forward and began releasing the professor. He worked with a will, and the work was soon done.

Hazlitt looked at his rescuer with intelligence in his eyes, and did not seem to be really injured, but even when he had been helped to a sitting position, his stiffened jaws would not allow him to speak intelligibly at first.

He rubbed them vigorously before trying to reply, while Paul looked around in increasing wonder. The room was in utter confusion. The floor was covered with clothing of all kinds, and the pockets of wearing apparel were turned inside out. The bureau drawers had been wholly removed and stood in a pile; the carpet was torn up all around the edges; and chaos seemed to reign supreme.

"What in the world does it mean?" muttered Paul, half-unconsciously.

"Outrage!" mumbled the professor.

"Who assaulted you?"

"Don't know."

"Don't know?"

"No."

"That's very odd."

"Give me water, please."

Paul obeyed, and Hazlitt thoroughly applied it both internally and externally. His jaws were relaxing, and he suddenly ceased work and looked up at his companion.

"It was all because of that cursed parchment!" he almost groaned.

"The parchment?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand."

"Nor I. I wish I did. It seems that somebody had an idea that the parchment was in my possession—they must have thought I had stolen it—and so they came here to recover it in this way. Who did it?"

He looked half-suspiciously at Paul, but the latter had never had a suspicion of Hazlitt's honesty, and he indignantly replied:

"Whoever thought it was a fool. But you say you do not know who it was. How is that? Were they masked?"

"No; at least, not to my knowledge. I did not see them. You see, I came in here after dinner, and fell asleep in my chair. My awakening was a rude one. I was aroused by rough hands upon me, and when I opened my eyes, could see nothing. The bandages had already been applied. I struggled, but my strength availed nothing against that of him who held me. I tried to call for help, but a gag was slipped into my mouth. I was powerless!"

The professor paused for a moment, but Paul eagerly urged him to continue.

"There were at least two of my assailants, for while one held me, the other applied the cords to my wrists and ankles. Then I was cast upon the bed and tied there firmly. All this while I had seen nothing, and as my enemies worked in utter silence, heard as little. I did not cease struggling, but all this was a loss of strength. I might as well have submitted quietly."

"But was there nothing to give you a clew to their identity?" Paul interrupted.

"Nothing."

"They were—a—both men?"

"I have no doubt of it, but even that is not sure. One certainly was—he who held me."

"Go on!"

"Once bound to the bed, my garments were thoroughly searched, but after that I was left alone. The room, however, was completely overhauled; its present condition testifies to the zeal of the searchers. Every nook and corner was looked into; nothing escaped their attention. At least an hour was thus consumed, and all the while I lay on the bed, unable to move a limb; unable to call for help; and then I heard the door unlocked, relocked, then—silence. And then I was left wholly alone and an age seemed to pass. I was in torture, and it only ended when you came."

CHAPTER XXX.

WHO IS GUILTY?

"But," said Paul quickly, "what did you mean by saying that this parchment was the cause of the trouble?"

"I said so because such is the fact," Hazlitt replied. "While the two unknown persons searched the room, they rarely addressed each other, and then only in cautious tones, but I will positively swear that I twice heard the word 'parchment.' The second time was just as they were going away, when I heard one of them say: 'If he has the parchment, it is hidden outside this room.'"

"It is very strange."

"Not so to me; I studied it out as I lay there. Some one evidently believes that I stole the parchment; that I was a traitor to you, and the real thief in the case."

"This is absurd!" cried Paul.

"It certainly is, for I would not be guilty of such a deed," said the professor, with real emotion. "I am no thief, but some people clearly believe that I am."

"Have you positively no theory as to who they were?"

"None whatever."

"They must have been inmates of this house," Hazlitt did not reply. It certainly looked that way, but it was not his place to suggest or foster a theory which would cast such a dark suspicion on those whose roof sheltered him. But he had repeatedly asked himself how any outsider could enter the house in broad day and do such a thing without being detected. It seemed impossible.

A flush of anger was mounting to Paul's face. He could account for the outrage in but one way—Commodore Nettleton had been at the bottom of it. His father had disapproved of the subject from the beginning, and had shown an aversion to all steps taken in the matter, before and after the robbery. What was more likely than that the hot-headed veteran had taken what he might believe the necessary step to end the affair?

The young man's wrath arose, and he asked Hazlitt to remain where he was for a few minutes, making no effort to restore things to their former condition.

He went out, was gone about ten minutes, and then returned accompanied by Commodore Nick.

The latter's face was unusually red, and he looked to be in a towering passion. He was, Paul had bluntly, and rashly, charged him with the assault on the professor, and for awhile the air bade fair to turn blue in the room. It was an insult the veteran could never forget. The idea that his own son should charge him with assaulting a guest under his roof was outrageous.

Barbara had averted what might have been an overwhelming crash, and partially calmed the commodore; and as she and Leona declared that they had been with the ex-mariner all the while that Hazlitt was in trouble, it was clear that all were innocent, or all guilty.

Suspicious as Paul was, he found it hard to believe the latter.

Nobody was more anxious to have the mystery cleared up than Commodore Nick, and he had now come to the room to see the scene of the mystery.

"Well, I'm blown if it don't look as though a squall had struck here and tipped every thing over. Professor, haven't you any idea who did it? If you have, spare nobody's feelings, but spit it right out."

"Unfortunately, I have none."

"When things come to the pass that work like this is done right in my own house, in broad day, it's time for an upheaval, I vow. Looks as though somebody was moving; carpets torn up, and all that sort of thing. It beats the dickens!"

"It is very strange that nobody heard them."

"Where's that detective?"

"Sure enough, I had entirely forgotten him."

Paul hurried out, and soon returned accompanied by Neat. The latter looked more melancholy than usual, but not by so much as one word did he betray surprise. He looked sadly at the upset room, and then quietly questioned Hazlitt and the commodore.

No light was thrown on the subject.

The detective proceeded to interview Mrs. Drake and Loyola. Both stated that they had been hard at work all the afternoon, but had neither seen an intruder in the house nor heard any suspicious sounds.

Joseph Jigson and Tim Welch were questioned. They had seen no strangers near the house. Search was made for a possible trail, but none was found.

Another mystery was added to the already large list, and Mr. Neat was as much perplexed as ever. He saw two ways of accounting for the affair. The first was that some one really believed that Hazlitt had stolen the parchment and concealed it in his room, and the visit to him was expected to reveal it. This, however, did not reveal the identity of the guilty parties. They might have been persons who wanted the parchment, themselves, or the deed might have been done solely because it was believed that Neat was on the wrong track.

The second plausible theory was that the whole matter was a farce, or, rather, that it was designed as a blind; a cover for those who already possessed the secret cipher.

But where was the blame to be placed?

Mr. Neat surprised Paul by going back to the old secretary, from which the parchment was originally lost, and making a thorough search of the interior. Of course the object was to make sure that it had not fallen into any niche by accident; but the fact that the drawer fitted so closely seemed to make this search wholly useless.

It was useless: the parchment was not in, or about, the secretary.

Next, Neat asked Paul if he had ever been known to walk in his sleep. The answer was emphatically in the negative. He was a very quiet sleeper, rarely dreamed, and had no inclination to somnambulism.

This theory exploded.

The man from San Francisco grew more melancholy. He could not grasp a solitary clew to the mystery. Paul still insisted that Red Jaguar and Loyola were thieves, but Neat doubted it. Admitting that they had a motive—which seemed impossible—he believed that their first step after securing it would have been to flee from the vicinity. If the parchment was worth stealing, it, and their safety, were certainly worth taking care of afterward.

Then there was the mystery of Rosa. All inquiries for her had failed, and those who were dragging Nigger Arm looked as much for her body as that of Bill Peters.

Neat believed that Rosa could explain the

robbery, if she was alive, but she was probably lying lifeless at the bottom of Nigger Arm, or had been carried oceanward by the tide.

He did not believe Rosa would have made herself an ally of the Indians in such a misdemeanor. More likely, he argued, she had had a lover; but, as before explained, he had declined to look upon either Jigson or Welch as guilty.

He felt that he must look further.

The professor's adventure had a demoralizing effect on all, or nearly all, members of the household. The boldness of the deed was almost past belief. Had it been at night it would have been no more than an ordinary occurrence; but it had been done by day, just when it seemed impossible to escape detection.

Besides Hazlitt, the commodore, Leona, Barbara, Mrs. Drake and Loyola had all been in the house. It had been a daring act to run the gantlet; it had been rare luck that the attempt was so successful.

What is secret and vicious is always to be dreaded; it is like fighting a foe in the dark; and though there was nothing to show that any of their lives was threatened, they were uneasy under the knowledge that these were unknown foes who had the skill to come and go at any time, unseen by the honest members of the house.

Barbara noticed that Leona was particularly nervous after this new revelation, yet she had seen Leona's nerves tested more than once. On one occasion, in San Francisco, the girl had captured a burglar alone, and marched him through the house to the commodore's room at the muzzle of a revolver.

And now Leona changed color like a school-girl, and trembled perceptibly. The commodore laughed at her for being so weak, as he expressed it.

Barbara did nothing of the kind.

Barbara had a theory.

She believed that Leona knew who had stolen the yellow parchment. This would have shocked her under some conditions, but not as she mentally explained the matter. Leona was, after a fashion, betrothed to Paul, and was expected to marry him. Barbara, however, knew that the girl disliked him, and had a strong fancy for Philip Warburton.

Leona was an honest, kind-hearted girl, but was not above worrying those she disliked. Was it not possible that, disgusted by the secrecy Paul made over the mysterious treasure, and pitying the commodore's vexation, she had taken and concealed the parchment?

This was Barbara's solution of the mystery, and though it left the professor's adventure unexplained, it did seem to account for Leona's nervousness and other new peculiarities. She had aroused more of a tempest than she had expected.

But what of the attack on Hazlitt?

Here Barbara was wholly at fault; she could not explain that; but the thoroughness of the search showed that the unknown person had been very much in earnest.

As the day grew near its close Leona donned her hat and went out. She seemed to have a definite object in view, and as she took the path that Philip Warburton nearly always used on his return from work, the nature of her purpose was not hard to surmise.

In due time Philip appeared, and he met Leona in the walk. Since the commodore had "changed his mind" and directed the overseer to stay, the latter had said no more about leaving, but this was entirely due to the fact that the note had been in Leona's writing, and had contained that significant addition: By L. E.

He felt that this meant a good deal, so he remained.

He was glad to see Leona on the present occasion, but soon perceived that she was not in her usual mood. Plainly she was anxious to have him stop, but she did not show the half-shy welcome she had given him in the past.

"Have you heard the news?" she abruptly asked, after a few commonplace words.

"About Professor Hazlitt? Yes; Welch came down to see us, to ask if we had seen any one lurking around."

"What do you think of it?"

"It is very mysterious," said Philip, with a thoughtful frown. "The whole affair is mysterious. Something has been stolen. What is it? Who was the thief? Who has done this last outrage? All is mystery."

"Can't you solve the mystery?"

"Unfortunately, I cannot."

"Have you been with your men all day?"

"Yes."

"And have seen nothing suspicious?"

"Nothing whatever."

"Somebody must know who the thief was."

"Certainly."

"That thief will be severely punished when caught."

"He will undoubtedly get the full benefit of law."

"Then I advise him to go away from here as soon as possible; to go without losing a moment."

"Perhaps he has already gone."

"I think not."

Philip looked at her closely.

"Do you suspect any one, Miss Erwin?"

"If I do, the secret will live and die with me. It may be that he did not fully realize how grave an act he was committing, but the law knows no mercy. If the thief remains near here he is sure to be caught, and disgrace and ruin are sure to follow. If he is wise he will go at once."

Philip looked at her in what seemed increasing surprise. She spoke rapidly, almost feverishly, and her gaze, wandering across the broad fields around them, never met his. A puzzled expression rested on his face, and he slowly replied:

"If you have a suspicion, I advise you to state it to Commodore Nettleton."

Leona turned upon him almost fiercely.

"You are the last man in the world to give that advice!" she exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXXI.

RED JAGUAR HAS SOMETHING TO SAY.

WARBURTON looked at the spirited speaker in surprise.

"I do not understand," he said. "Will you explain?"

Leona stood with her hand pressed over her heart, as though there was unusual emotion there, and she seemed to struggle for calmness before she replied:

"If one who is of the family is willing to forgive the robber, you ought to be."

"True; I have no personal interest in the matter."

"Don't you think the robber had better leave here?"

"After having returned his booty, yes."

"Perhaps he dare not return it."

"That is possible."

"In any case, he had better leave here before he is detected. It will then be too late, and Paul Nettleton will show him no mercy. He must go away."

Warburton had grown more perplexed, for both the words and manner of his companion were very peculiar, but Leona suddenly started, looked at the setting sun, said something about being in haste, and hurried away toward the house.

The overseer looked after her until she disappeared.

"Well," he thought, "I don't know what to make of this. I never saw her in such a mood, and the way she kept reiterating that the robber ought to go away was remarkable. One would think—Ha! can it be she thinks I am the robber?"

Philip looked dumfounded, laughed and then grew grave again. Whatever it might otherwise have been, it was no laughing matter to be thought a thief by the girl he loved. But he saw no other way to explain the matter. She had plainly met him intentionally, and had then devoted nearly all her time to asserting that robber ought to make his escape while he could.

Philip moved on with a rueful expression on his face. He could not imagine what had led Leona to believe him guilty of the crime, and he felt himself awkwardly placed. But then, she might not think anything of the kind, he might have read her motives wrong.

As he passed along, a horseman came down the road at an easy pace. Philip looked up and saw the placid face of Frazer Hot Heart. The latter nearly always wore a placid expression; had it not been for his occasional outbursts, when he chastised some man just to keep his hand in, one would have said he was at peace with the whole world.

Between him and Warburton there was good will, and both bowed pleasantly as the Fire-Eater passed.

The latter rode on to Convent Rest, stabled Jack Jet, and then went in and prepared his own supper.

Convent Rest was not a mansion, but it suited him well. Looking from the window he had a grand view of the Pacific, the broad fields and the frowning top of Porcupine Ridge. There were some clouds on his life, but he took matters easy and was more contented than the average of men.

He had finished supper and was placidly smoking when footsteps sounded on the stairs. He waited for the unknown to show himself. He did not fear that it was Garth Griffith, for the Bush-Wolf would not have come with so manly tread. He had only a moment to wait, and then the visitor appeared.

It was Red Jaguar, the Indian chief.

Hot Heart promptly rose, went forward, and gave the red-man his hand.

"You are welcome, chief—very welcome," he said.

"Hot Heart did not expect to see me here," was the quiet reply, though the chief had returned the hand-pressure with due warmth.

"Hardly, I confess; though after our experience on Porcupine Ridge, when we rescued Miss Nettleton, we ought not to be ceremonious. I am glad to see you; pray be seated."

"Hot Heart's name is not well chosen; it

should be Big Heart," Red Jaguar gravely observed.

"Thank you, chief. By the way, when you came in did you see Paul Nettleton or any one else of Coast Castle?"

"No."

"They are looking for you."

"Red Jaguar knows it."

"And, very likely, will foil their every attempt to find him. His shrewdness overmatches them all."

"Red Jaguar has stolen nothing from them."

"They think you have."

"Hot Heart could tell them different."

"I, chief? For once you are mistaken."

"Look, brother," said the Indian, waving one of his broad hands slightly, "it is well that we should speak plain. We know each other. Red Jaguar is Hot Heart's friend, and he hopes Hot Heart will prove to be his. The Indian is not blind; let him tell what he has seen while others have been like owls in a bright sun."

"Several months ago, as the white man would say, Hot Heart was in Mexico. One day while wandering among the hills he found another man lying at the base of a cliff, crushed and dying. He had fallen from the top. Much to Hot Heart's surprise he recognized him as a man he had met two years before and liked well. His name was Bennett."

"The man died in my brother's arms, but before his last breath was drawn he had told a story that fired my brother's heart. Bennett and Paul Nettleton had been together in the hills for many days. Bennett had not accidentally fallen from the cliff, but his false friend had pushed him over, and he gave the reason why it had been done."

"Hot Heart buried him there and swore revenge. To accomplish his object he came to California and settled here, waiting for Paul Nettleton to return. Perhaps it was his object to shoot the assassin; I cannot say as to that; but before Paul came a change had come over Hot Heart's spirit. He had seen Paul's fair sister, and after that he hesitated to harm the brother."

"He saw a way, however, to be revenged on Paul without doing him bodily harm, and this he set about doing."

"There is something missing from Coast Castle; something which has been the cause of much crime. Because of that Paul Nettleton pushed Bennett over the cliff, and there are other misfortunes following in the train. Paul's heart was set on his prize, and Hot Heart knew it. How could he be better revenged on him than by taking away what is now missing from Nettleton's?"

Frazer had listened calmly but attentively to this long speech, and though he smoked serenely on, he lost no passing change in the speaker's voice or face.

"In plain words," he said, "you think I have taken it?"

"I have spoken."

"But shot wide of the mark. I have it not—I never saw it—and I had no part, direct or indirect, in the taking of it."

"Is my brother speaking with a straight tongue?"

"I am."

"Then who has taken it?"

"If you can't explain it, I don't know who can."

"Hot Heart believes that Red Jaguar took it?"

"In two words—I do."

"My brother is wrong. If Red Jaguar had secured it, he would now be far away."

"That's a strong argument, and one that had occurred to me before; but you will admit that you came to this vicinity to secure it."

"Some one struck ahead of Red Jaguar."

"Who else could want it?"

"The Indian thought the Hermit had taken it."

"And made a mistake. No, I did not take it. Now, who is there besides us two who would take it?"

"I know not."

The men looked at each other in silence for several moments. It was plain that they mutually doubted each other's veracity in the case, but Frazer at least had spoken the exact truth. He finally added, slowly:

"It's gone, anyhow."

"Has some one else learned how valuable it is?"

"I don't see who could have learned the fact. I have it on good authority that Paul has been very secretive. He sent for Professor Hazlitt, who is a very learned man, and they shut themselves up with it and admitted no one. They never told even Commodore Nettleton that such a thing existed until it was gone. No one had reason to suspect what their secret was, and if any one had seen it by chance, I believe it would not have aroused his cupidity. It is a most perplexing mystery."

"Red Jaguar had hoped his brother knew about it," said the chief, deep disappointment in his voice.

"I wish I did."

"Is the white detective, Neat, a wise man?"

"He looks to be deep and crafty."

"He may find it."

"If he does, I'll wager something that you don't allow him to keep it long."

"We shall see. Hot Heart, I hear there is much talk about a white girl who has disappeared."

"Rosa? Yes; she has gone as mysteriously as it went."

"The white detective thinks she may have known of it."

"It is possible; but 'tis believed she has drowned herself in Nigger Arm."

"Why should she?"

"Now you have me. I can't explain any part of it. 'Tis a strange business, all around."

Red Jaguar again sat in silence, and his usually stoical face expressed deep regret. Hot Heart watched him closely. Was he really sincere in what he had said? Until that evening Fire-Eater had not had a doubt as to who had been the robber, but everything went to prove that the chief was sincere.

If he had secured the missing article, it did seem as though he would promptly have fled from California.

He finally arose abruptly.

"I will go now, brother," he said.

"Well, chief, I hope you will not make yourself a stranger to me after this. You have my best wishes, and between you and Paul, my choice will always be that you win the prize."

"If my brother gets news, will he tell Red Jaguar?"

"I certainly will. How can I get word to you?"

"Red Jaguar can read the written characters of the pale-faces. Leave a letter by the dead tree in Shaker's Timber, in the hollow of the big limb—you can easily find it—and it will reach me."

"It shall be done. You can rely on me, chief."

The Indian turned partly away, came back and gave Frazer his hand, and then went down the stairs and out into the night. He left the Fire-Eater greatly bewildered.

"The mystery deepens," Frazer muttered. "I believe the chief spoke the truth, and the treasure is more lost than ever. But who has it? There is the rub. I can't account for it at all, but Detective Neat is hot on the trail and may learn something. There is likely to be a lively time before this matter is settled."

CHAPTER XXXII.

ROSA'S LOVER.

THE following morning Frazer arose and prepared his breakfast as usual. He had eaten it, and was sitting by the window, indulging in his favorite amusement of smoking, when three men walked up to his door.

They were Mr. Neat, Paul Nettleton and Garth Griffith.

Frazer scented trouble at once. Two of the men, at least, were his enemies, and the detective was not the man to make a visit that had no motive. As for Garth, he brought up the rear and skulked along exactly as his cousin, the four-footed wolf, might have done.

Despite his presentiment of trouble, Frazer kept his chair and smoked on calmly while they entered the building and came up-stairs.

Neat led the way, looking sour and melancholy but the Fire-Eater nodded coolly as he appeared.

"Good-morning, Mr. Neat. Glad to see you at Convent Rest. Good-morning, Nettleton. And here is my old friend, Griffith, bold as an eagle and handsome as a scarecrow. Do you bring a powder-keg with you, Mr. Bush-Wolf?"

His manner was outwardly very genial, but Garth sheltered himself behind Neat and made no reply.

"We have come on business, Mr. Hot Heart," said the detective, in his most melancholy manner.

"Have you? That's good. What's the point?"

"We wish to know where Rosa is."

"Do you mean the missing domestic?"

"That is exactly what I do mean."

"You should speak more plainly then. To answer you, I will say I am not a detective; nor have I hung out a shingle as manager of a bureau of information; so I am unable to tell you."

"We believe you know."

"The dickens you do!"

"Yes, sir."

Frazer glanced at Paul Nettleton. He felt sure that all this was attributable to Paul, and in all probability there was a deep plot working against him. He felt a strong desire to spring forward and throttle him, but Barbara's face seemed to rise between them, and the Fire-Eater quelled his hostile inclinations and continued to smoke as serenely as before.

"Why do you think so?" he asked.

"Ever since Rosa disappeared," replied Neat, "it has been in my mind that the unfortunate girl had a lover, and that she would never have found it necessary to flee but for this lover. So I have been looking for him, and I believe I have found him. You are the lover!"

Hot Heart laughed lightly.

"Bless your dear soul, Neat, you were never further from the truth. I don't remember ever speaking with her."

"We will prove the contrary."

"By whom?"

"You will know in good time."

"There are witnesses," added Hot Heart, looking at Paul and Garth, "by whom anything might be proven. I respectfully invite any and all men to tell the truth, but if any one lies about me, I will give him one hundred lashes on the bare back and then flay him alive!"

This sanguinary threat was made in a terrible voice, and the Bush-Wolf's knees knocked together and almost failed to support his body. He wished then that he had never seen Paul, nor bargained to do harm to the Fire-Eater, but it was too late to retreat. He must abide by the bargain.

Paul, however, smiled scornfully.

"I am an officer," said Neat, "and will see that justice is done you; no more, no less. Will you accompany us to Clifftown?"

"As a prisoner?"

"No: to meet the witnesses."

Frazer had no great amount of faith in the explanation, but he cheerfully consented. He saddled Jack Jet, and as Tim Welch had brought over other horses from Coast Castle, the entire party rode to Clifftown together. On the way Neat and Frazer talked steadily about minor matters, and no one would have supposed there was bad blood in the party.

Amos Huglife was the magistrate of the town, and they went at once to his office. He had evidently expected them, and had two other citizens with him. Being a jovial man, he shook hands with all the new-comers except the Bush-Wolf, giving Hot Heart as warm a welcome as any other of the party.

Little time was lost before proceeding to business.

"Is your witness in the next room, Mr. Huglife?" asked the detective.

"She is, Mr. Neat."

"Before you summon her, I wish to say that it is our direct purpose to show what has become of Rosa Strong, the servant missing from Coast Castle. This done, other points may fall into line. You may call the witness, sir."

Huglife opened the door, spoke a few words, and the mysterious witness appeared. It was the widow of Palmer Hague. Zenobia had not improved in appearance since her visit to Coast Castle. She looked older, more emaciated and broad, dark lines encircled her eyes. Hot Heart, looking at her, suspected that her hold on life was weak, and would soon be lost forever.

She was given a seat, and her attention directed to the Fire-Eater by Mr. Neat.

"Do you know this gentleman?"

"I have seen him," replied Zenobia, curtly.

"But have no personal acquaintance with him?"

"None whatever."

"Have you ever heard his name prominently mentioned?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"Rosa Strong."

Hot Heart settled back more comfortably in his chair. He no longer had a doubt as to the situation. His enemies had conspired to crush him, and Zenobia was one of their tools. He had at one time been under arrest as the suspected slayer of Palmer Hague, and as it was impossible to connect him with that affair, the revengeful woman had evidently determined to reach him otherwise.

"Will you clearly state what you know about Rosa, and what she told you?" continued the detective.

Zenobia sighed before she answered. She seemed strangely quiet for her, but it was only a mask. Every nerve was throbbing painfully.

"I am, as you know," said she, "the widow of Palmer Hague. It was that which brought me to Clifftown, but as it does not concern this case, I trust that I need not refer to it here."

"Certainly not, madam; confine your attention to the case of Rosa."

"After I came to Clifftown my mind was all the time upon the tragedy which had deprived me of a husband. One evening I took the notion to walk over to the place where he was shot. This was the evening of the 18th, which you may remember as a half-cloudy, but beautiful, night."

"I had looked the scene of the tragedy over, and was sitting on the ground beside the bushes and began to sob like one in great distress. It was a woman, and I knew from her movements that she was young."

"My heart went out to her at once. I knew not who she was, nor what her trouble was; but the darkness of my own life drew me to this weeping woman by the strong bond of sisterly sympathy."

"I arose, went to her with light steps and laid my hand on her shoulder. She started up in alarm, and seemed about to flee, but I spoke to her kindly, and then she dropped back on the ground and began to weep afresh."

"I had seen her face, young, fair and innocent, and my heart went out to her. I bent and placed my hand on her shoulder again."

"You are in trouble," I said. "What is wrong?"

"Don't ask me!" she replied.

"Nay," said I, "but why should I not? We are both women, and I, too, have seen trouble."

"Upon that she lifted her head and looked at me in a calmer way. She knew me, spoke my name, referred to my own late trouble, and a sort of a bond was established between us. She ceased weeping, and we talked on various matters. I did not urge her further to confide in me, but her heart was full and she longed to speak to some one. I was different from the women who lived here regularly; she dared not confide in them, for fear they would spread her secret; but with me it was different. I was a stranger, and would not repeat what she said.

"Finally she did speak out. Her trouble all came from the new owner of the old convent—Frazer Hot Heart. She had happened to meet him once, and he was very kind, polite and gallant. He had professed great admiration for her, and she, poor child, had not the wisdom and strength to resist his arts.

"The first meeting was followed by many others, and Hot Heart made love to her desperately. Never before had such a fine gentleman paid attention to her; he professed to love and admire her; and not only was her head turned, but her heart was completely his.

"Up to this time she had told me nothing to explain her sorrow, but after a good deal of hesitation she went on and explained, or partly explained, that also. She had learned that her idol was not perfect. He had asked her to commit a crime. What it was she would not say; but I know it did not concern her directly, and *did* call for treachery to the Nettletons.

"This demand had revealed to her the fact that he did not love her; that he had not sought her for herself, but in order to make her his tool in the mysterious crime which she would not explain. I asked if he wished her to rob the Nettletons, and she said hurriedly that he already had money enough.

"My last pointed question had frightened her, and she seemed to regret her confidence. She made me promise to keep her secret, pleaded work at the house as an excuse for leaving me, and hurried away. I never saw her afterward."

"And this is all you have to say?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are quite sure that Frazer Hot Heart was the lover she referred to?"

"I am positive."

"That will do."

Zenobia rose, and Mr. Huglife escorted her to the adjoining room. Neat looked sharply at Frazer. The latter's composure had never wavered during the ordeal, and his careless expression made him seem one of the least interested persons present. Innocent or guilty, he bore it well.

Mr. Neat turned away and sharply said:

"Garth Griffith, we will now hear your testimony!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHAT GARTH KNEW ABOUT IT.

THE Bush-Wolf started nervously. He had been sitting behind Mr. Huglife, the largest man present, and peering over his shoulder at Frazer Hot Heart as one would at an unchained tiger. Garth was frightened. His whole life had been devoted to crime in its various grades, but he was terribly afraid of the Hermit.

He wished himself a hundred miles away, and that he had never bargained with any one to injure the Fire-Eater. The very calmness of the latter terrified him, and he felt a sickening presentiment that the man would visit his sins upon him in a way which would leave but little of Garth Griffith.

"Senor, I have but little to tell, but—"

Thus far had he faintly spoken, trying to keep behind Huglife, but the bluff magistrate had never heard of a witness crouching down behind him when testifying, and without any idea of how he was overwhelming the Bush-Wolf, he brought him around and made him the central figure of the group.

Once there, he was exactly facing the Hermit, and the latter fixed a gaze upon him which made Garth's knees tremble more than ever.

He twirled his old, ragged hat uneasily, and his own gaze wandered about as though he was looking for some hole through which he could dodge.

"Now, then," said Neat, "what do you know?"

"Senor," faltered the half-breed, "I am abroad much at night."

Huglife smiled broadly; he knew that every man in Clifftown who kept fowls would be willing to swear that, in his opinion, Garth was often "abroad at night."

"State one occasion when you were abroad."

"The night that Rosa Strong disappeared."

"What did you see then?"

The terrible eyes were still on the Bush-Wolf, and he squirmed about in his chair before answering.

"Senor, I had been on the north fields looking for game, and returned by the Clifftown road, passing Coast Castle. It was then eleven

o'clock, I think. I came on, and was passing the old convent when I saw two persons moving along.

"I was in the shadow of the bushes, and I paused to look at them. The night was bright, though the moon had not risen, and I recognized them easily. They were—"

Garth's wandering gaze had encountered the Hermit's fixed one, and he paused abruptly.

"Who were they?" Neat asked.

"Senor Hot Heart and Rosa Strong!"

"Ah! Do you swear that this was at eleven o'clock, the night that Rosa disappeared?"

"I do, senor."

"Were they talking?"

"Yes, senor."

"In a friendly or quarrelsome way?"

To save his life the Bush-Wolf could not avoid glancing at the Fire-Eater, and that terrible gaze completely upset him.

"Friendly," he faltered.

Hot Heart glanced at Paul Nettleton. The young man's face bore a black scowl.

"What happened, Garth?"

The Bush-Wolf twirled his hat and glanced at the Fire-Eater. That gaze was again bent upon him.

"They walked away, and so did I."

"Which way did they go?"

"Toward Coast Castle."

"Did you see them again?"

"No, senor."

"Or hear anything unusual?"

"No, senor."

They were through with Garth, and he slunk back behind Huglife like a whipped cur. Paul looked disappointed and angry. Detective Neat's face was impassive. He turned deliberately toward the Fire-Eater.

"Mr. Hot Heart, what have you to say to all this?"

"Well, sir, I believe if Mrs. Hague and Garth were to combine, they could write a novel which would shatter the fame of Arabian Nights and Robinson Crusoe all to kindling-wood. As liars, they certainly excel."

"Do you mean that you deny their allegations?"

"Rather. There isn't a word of truth in either story. I was not with Rosa the night she disappeared, nor did I see her. As for the story Mrs. Hague says was told her, somebody has lied like perdition. There was no ground for the story. I never made love to Rosa; I never asked her to commit a crime for me; and I never spoke with her in my life!"

This sweeping denial was emphatically made, and Mr. Huglife looked perplexed. Hot Heart had the appearance of an honest man, but the testimony was strong against him.

"Of course he denies all," put in Paul Nettleton.

Hot Heart wheeled sharply upon the speaker.

"Why shouldn't I?" he demanded.

"Criminals rarely confess at the beginning."

"No, but they sometimes come to grief, especially if the crime is murder!" was the retort.

Much to his dismay Paul felt that he was growing pale, but he tried to maintain a bold air.

"Just what we intend shall be the result in this case," he answered. "Mr. Huglife, I charge this man with having made way with Rosa Strong. I charge him with having led the girl on to steal a certain article from Coast Castle, and then, when he had obtained it, with having put her out of the way. I believe he has killed the girl!"

"Paul Nettleton, you lie!"

Hot Heart thundered the words, and he arose with a face flushed red, and his eyes blazing. His appearance recalled all the terrible tales told of him as a "Fire-Eater," and Garth Griffith darted from cover just as Huglife sprung back in alarm, falling over his chair and crushing it. And while the magistrate lay sprawling there, Garth made one leap and shot through the window like an acrobat.

Paul, too, was startled, and he fully expected to be assaulted, but Mr. Neat kept his seat with unshaken calmness.

"Mr. Hot Heart, sit down!" he coolly said.

"Now that you mention it, Mr. Neat, I will," said the Fire-Eater, and he did so.

His sudden change of manner was so remarkable, that even Mr. Neat looked astonished for a moment, while Huglife gathered himself up and looked ruefully at the broken chair. He also felt somewhat ashamed of his trepidation.

"In a word, these charges are absurd," added Frazer.

"Well, you see how I am placed," replied Neat. "I have the task of finding a certain article lost at Coast Castle, and to learn what became of Rosa Strong. Mrs. Hague's testimony seems to show that you induced Rosa to commit the theft, while that of Garth Griffith would indicate that you have spirited the girl away."

"Possibly to the waters of Nigger Arm," added Paul.

"Possibly not!" Hot Heart replied. "I know nothing about Rosa, in any way, shape or form. Garth, at least, has deliberately lied. I wonder that you entertain these charges. What is Griffith? A notorious scoundrel, as all the world

knows. Who is Mrs. Hague? A woman mad for revenge because her husband has been killed!"

"All this you can urge at your trial, Mr. Hot Heart."

"I shall have more than this to say there," the Fire-Eater replied with a grim look at Paul.

"You still say that you can tell us nothing about Rosa or the robbery?"

"I know nothing about either."

"Well, Mr. Neat," said Huglife, suddenly coming out of his obscurity, "what bail shall we fix?"

"Bail!" echoed Paul.

"Yes."

"This not aailable case."

"Why isn't it?"

"Rosa Strong's fate is not settled."

"We have no reason to believe she has been harmed. If she is in Nigger Arm, more likely it was suicide."

"I appeal to Mr. Neat," said Paul excitedly.

"I see no objection to releasing the prisoner on good bail; say about two thousand dollars."

Paul opposed this strenuously, but Huglife was an obstinate man when he had a fixed opinion. He insisted that until there was more direct proof against Hot Heart, he should not hold him, and settled on two thousand dollars as the necessary sum; whereupon the Fire-Eater produced a plethoric pocket-book and coolly counted out the money.

There was enough left, too, to enable him to make a stout legal fight.

Paul was very angry, and when he saw Frazer ride coolly away on Jack Jet, he turned upon Neat and Huglife and denounced their course sharply. If he had been wise he would not have done it. Neat, at least, was an important figure in the case, and it was very imprudent to quarrel with him.

His reply, however, was very brief.

"I advise you to save your words awhile, Mr. Nettleton. Before I am through with this case I will make all clear, and then only the guilty will have cause to complain."

The cool, dry remark struck a chill to Paul's blood, and he began to wish he had never brought the San Francisco man into the affair.

Zenobia Hague was told that she could go home, and she went at once. Don Esteban Villegas was waiting in the parlor when she arrived, and he started up eagerly.

"Well," he said, "is Hot Heart's neck in the halter?"

"Not yet," was the vicious reply.

"But he is locked up?"

"Not even that."

"What! did you and Griffith fail to tell your stories?"

"I told mine exactly as you directed, but Griffith weakened and utterly failed."

"Didn't he say that he saw Hot Heart push the servant-girl over the cliff?"

"No. He merely said that he saw them walking together that night, talking in a friendly way."

"Curse the fellow!" raved the Mexican, "how dared he play me false?"

"Hot Heart frightened him out of his wits," and then Zenobia described the Bush-Wolf's conduct under examination, as seen and heard by her through the half-open door.

Villegas swore roundly, calling down curses on Garth's head, and when he realized the folly of this, sullenly added:

"One more effort gone, but I will snare him yet. Will you hold to your story?"

"You promise to reveal my husband's murderer?"

"I do."

"Then I will keep my compact with you."

"So far, good, and if I don't find some way to snare Hot Heart, my head has lost its cunning. I'm playing a desperate game, but I am bound to win."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A HOUSEHOLD UNDER A SPELL.

TIM WELCH wandered out into the garden where Joseph Jigson was at work. Since Rosa's disappearance they had been friends. Before, both had been suitors for her hand, and though usually good friends they quarreled nearly every day concerning her. Since her disappearance they had mutually agreed that neither ever had a chance. She was young and pretty; they were middle-aged and homely. So they devoted their spare time to consoling each other, and trying to lighten their sad hearts.

On this occasion Timothy found Joseph leaning on his garden-rake, and gazing sadly at the watering-pot.

"Still thinkin' about Rosa, Mr. Jigson?"

Joseph shook his head.

"No, Mr. Welch, hit is han entirely different matter."

"It seems to trouble ye."

"It does."

Joseph ran his rake along a flower-bed, and then added:

"Mr. Welch, what would you do if you had a weight of woe hon your mind?"

"Oi should thry to get rid ave it."

"Suppose some crime 'aunted you?"
 "Be jabbers! that's a matter fer a priest."
 "It hought to be confessed, Mr. Welch?"
 "Ave course it had, Mr. Jigson."
 Joseph sighed dismally.
 "Have yez a crime on your mind?"
 "Mr. Welch, don't hask me; don't hask me, sir."

"Oi can't imagine what crime *you've* done."
 "Don't try to," said Joseph, hurriedly.
 "Has a friend to me, Mr. Welch, don't try. Forget that I spoke hof it. Pity ha 'eart-broken man, sir, and forget hall I 'ave said. Let it be buried ha fathom deep."

Mr. Jigson showed such perturbation of spirit that Tim readily promised, and during the few minutes that the coachman remained no more was said about it. But when again alone Tim remembered and wondered at his fellow-servant's manner. What troubled him? What crime had he committed? The coachman wondered more and more, but suddenly started and grew agitated himself.

"By the powers! can it be that *he* is the chap that stole that lost thingumjig from dhe house? He might have done it—but Oi won't think it 'ave Mr. Jigson. He's an honest mon—but no; he intimated dhat he had committed a crime. By me life! Oi bel'ave he's dhe thafe!"

Just then Philip Warburton dropped into the stable for a moment, and Tim forgot his suspicion for the time. Philip did not remain long; he had come hoping to see Leona, and when he did see her in the garden he went to join her.

The half-formed suspicion in his mind that Leona believed that *he* had stolen the yellow parchment needed to be put to rest, and he was resolved to speak plainly.

She received him with such grave kindness that he found it difficult to mention the matter. Perhaps she did not suspect him. If so, would it not cause her to suspect if he approached the subject? This was a momentous question, and he decided to delay awhile; so they talked about minor matters, and Leona was so much like herself that he grew encouraged. Still, there was the memory of her strange words on a former occasion, and he resolved to have the matter settled.

"Is there any new light on the robbery, Miss Erwin?" he asked, with assumed carelessness.

She shot a quick, peculiar glance toward his face.

"Not that I am aware of," she answered.

"Has nothing been learned as to how the thief entered the house last time, provided it was the same one?"

"Nothing at all."

"I do not see how the robbery was effected in silence. Professor Hazlitt sleeps in the room next to Mr. Paul Nettleton, does he not?"

"Yes."

"And the commodore in the west chamber?"

"Yes."

"While you and Miss Nettleton are at the north?"

"Exactly."

"Does the detective now have a room alone?"

"Yes."

"Allow me to ask which one?"

"The northeast chamber."

"Then the house is surrounded, as I may express it, and all these rooms were occupied when the parchment was stolen, except Neat's. How could a robber move about unheard?"

"You forget that it may have occurred in the evening, before any one retired."

"True," Philip admitted.

He had been trying to advance an argument to prove that no one outside the house could have committed the robbery, so it must have been done by some member of the household; but his argument had fallen flat, and he was so discouraged by the failure that he did not make another attempt to have his suspicions solved.

They parted without an understanding, and whatever Leona might then have thought of the interview, coming events were destined to make her remember the peculiar questions Philip had just asked, and remember them vividly, too.

If Mr. Neat made any progress during the afternoon toward solving any of his mysteries, nobody else suspected it. He looked sour, as well as melancholy, and seemed brooding over some deep trouble. Paul again hunted up the Bush-Wolf, and they went in search of Red Jaguar; but even the half-breed's skill was not sufficient to unearth the wily chief.

He wanted to keep out of sight, and he did so admirably.

All that Detective Neat had upon his mind was not sufficient to keep him awake that night; he fell asleep quickly, and was for several hours unconscious of all that was transpiring around him.

When he awoke, his first feeling was one of illness. His head ached; a disagreeable taste was in his mouth; and somehow, the air seemed laden with an unusual and disagreeable odor. Next came a desire for water and fresh air. He rose, and going to the window, found it entirely closed. He could almost have sworn that he had left it partially open, but it seemed not.

He then struck a match to see to pour the water.

As he did so, he stood like one turned to stone. And no wonder; what he saw was strange and startling.

He had gone to bed in the neatest, most orderly room imaginable; he awoke to find it in utter confusion. The carpet was torn up all around the edges; the bureau had been overhauled and displaced; his clothes lay on the floor, with pockets turned inside out; and the whole aspect of the place was one to suggest the heavy hand of an earthquake, or something of the kind.

Detective Neat was dumfounded, but was not the man to remain long at fault. He had witnessed another scene nearly like this; it was almost a repetition of the state of Professor Hazlitt's room that memorable afternoon.

In a moment Neat knew what meant the headache, the taste in his mouth, and the strange odor in his room. He had been drugged, and his room subjected to the same search which had been visited upon Hazlitt's.

Then the detective became a lion. Without waiting to don any additional clothing he seized the lamp in one hand and his revolver in the other, and strode from the room.

Nobody was in the hall; the house was dark and silent.

He entered Paul's chamber.

There he was met by the strange odor, but this was not the most startling feature. On the floor lay Paul Nettleton, bound, gagged and blindfolded exactly as Hazlitt had been on a former occasion, and the room was in exactly the same state of confusion.

Neat dropped on his knees and liberated the bound man, but Paul was unconscious. The drug had not released its hold upon him. The detective opened the window, and hurried to Hazlitt's room. Like the other two, it was in utter disorder; the strange odor was there, and in bed lay the professor, unconscious and breathing heavily.

After opening his window, the detective went to his own room, partially dressed, and then started for Loyola's room. He was resolved to see the Indian woman without delay, and see if she had escaped what he now believed to be a general upheaval.

Every room through which he passed was in the same condition—every carpet was torn up, and all other things flung about in dire confusion.

Neat used no ceremony at Loyola's door, but promptly entered. Here the now familiar scene met his gaze—disorder reigned supreme. And Loyola lay motionless in bed. Was she shamming, or not? The same odor was strongly in the room, but it might be a blind.

He shook the Indian woman, but she did not stir; her condition seemed exactly like that of Paul and Hazlitt. The detective was a keen observer and good judge, and he exerted all his skill to judge this part of the case correctly.

He was forced to the belief that Loyola was as genuinely drugged and unconscious as any of them.

Only one more step remained to be taken: he must visit the commodore's room. He went, and found the old scene again repeated.

After that there was no questioning one fact. Some person, or persons, desiring to find a certain article, had entered the house, drugged every inmate thereof, and searched every room in such a thorough way that scarcely a pin would have escaped their search.

And why had all this been done? There was but one answer in Detective Neat's mind:

To secure the yellow parchment!

Wonders upon wonders accumulated, and then, if never before, Neat understood how much the parchment was valued by some one. By whom? Ah! there came in the mystery. Already once stolen, the strange thing, asserted by Paul to be of the mere riddle class, was so ardently desired by other persons that a whole house had been figuratively overturned.

While he was thinking thus, Paul and Hazlitt both appeared; the fresh air had revived them.

"In the fiend's name!" cried Paul, "what does this wholesale confusion mean?"

"It is," retorted Neat, sarcastically, "an illustration of how riddles and conundrums will turn men's brains. An entire household is under a spell, and all because of a worthless scrap of parchment—a riddle!"

"The Indians have been here again!" declared Paul.

Neat caught him rudely by the arm.

"Always the Indians!" he cried. "Fool, Indians do not aspire to solve childish charades and rebuses. Will you now explain the nature of the yellow parchment?"

CHAPTER XXXV.

SEEKING LIGHT.

BEFORE Paul could answer the commodore appeared, looking supremely astonished, and the last question was not then pressed. When the ex-mariner knew what a wholesale visitation had been given his house his first thought was of Barbara, but her appearance quickly allayed his fears.

Her room, too, was overhauled; she, too, had been drugged, but had recovered unaided.

She went to care for Leona, who was found just coming to her senses, and when Loyola came around she was given similar work with Mrs. Drake.

Due investigation had now been made, and it was known positively that every room in the house had been subjected to the same thorough search, and every person drugged.

But who had done it? Nobody could tell. Since the yellow parchment was stolen Paul had not cared whether the doors and windows were fastened or not, and as several of the latter were open, there was nothing to prevent intrusion of outside parties if they had used a ladder to reach the second-story windows—the open ones.

With one exception none of the drugged persons had known of the presence of their enemies. All had been put quietly, secretly, noiselessly under the influence of the unknown soporific, and had slept quietly through the ransacking which followed—all except Paul.

He had been awakened by the efforts to stupefy him, and had had a struggle with the unknown. They were unknown, for though he fought to the best of his ability, he had neither seen their faces nor gained a clue to their identity. He had been bound, and then drugged like all the rest by means of a saturated sponge held close to his nostrils.

Neat lost little time before going outside to investigate.

First of all he looked for marks of a ladder at some particular window, or footprints. He found nothing of the kind. He then looked up Welch and Jigson. He found them in bed, looking innocent enough. They had not been drugged, nor would they admit having heard anything.

Neat returned to the house.

His next move was to learn how the chamber doors had been unlocked—for every member of the household insisted that his, or her, door had been locked and the key left inside.

The housekeeper's keys were found where she always kept them; in her chamber; but if they had been used, how were they first obtained? Here was a mystery Neat could not solve.

The detective found himself very much at fault. He believed that the work had been done by the same parties who had visited Hazlitt's chamber on a previous occasion. There was little room to doubt it. But who were they?

Paul's belief that it was the work of the Indians was staggered by Loyola's condition, but Neat was not so easily downcast. Loyola, he reasoned—though he said nothing aloud—might have done it all, and then taken the drug in some form herself.

He questioned her adroitly. If she was acting a part, he had never seen one better acted. Her answers and her manner were strongly calculated to impress one with a belief in her innocence. Moreover, Paul asserted that there had been at least two assailants. Hazlitt had said the same on the previous occasion.

Neat had eyes for everything and everybody, and he noticed that one of the household acted in a very peculiar manner.

Leona Erwin had nothing to say except when addressed directly, and then her replies were such as to give the impression that she was concealing something. Pale and nervous, she stood and listened without advancing an idea of her own.

If she had been a servant Mr. Neat would have marked her as a party to the robbery; but the position she occupied in the family placed her where he could hardly suspect her. At the same time, he believed she was concealing something. And he was right.

Now that this terrible thing had occurred, Leona remembered the conversation she had had only a few hours before with Philip Warburton. She remembered how particularly he had inquired where each member of the family slept, including the detective. What could have been his object? She believed there was but one way of answering the question.

He was one of the mysterious robbers.

It was this that made her so nervous and unhappy, and she felt as though a dark cloud had fallen over her life, never to leave again.

By Neat's advice they finally returned to bed. He felt sure the unknown persons would not come again. After such a search they must be convinced that the yellow parchment was not in the house, and that was all they wanted.

The family retired, but there was little sleep in the house the remainder of the night. Who could sleep after what had occurred? It showed the power and boldness of the unknown foe, and only the detective felt sure they would not come again.

He was positive the danger was past. Jewels, money and silver plate had been left unmolested. They were not wanted. The robbers had learned that the coveted article was not there, and they would look elsewhere next if they looked again.

But the events of the night, the drugging of so many persons and the upheaval of the house, showed the vast importance which the mysterious yellow parchment must possess in the eyes of the equally mysterious seekers for it.

In the morning further search was made for the intruders' trail, but without success. Nothing whatever could be found of it by the inexperienced persons who tried. Paul, however, suggested that they go for Garth Griffith, and make use of his keen eyes. Probably he could find and follow it, if it actually led away from the house. So Paul and Mr. Neat started off to find the Bush-Wolf.

Shortly after their departure Joseph Jigson was working in the garden, his rake and watering-pot playing their usual important part, and feeling in a very crabbed mood, when the sound of footsteps caused him to look up.

He saw Frazer Hot Heart, swinging a whip in his hand.

Now, Joseph did not like the master of Convent Rest. He knew nothing positively bad of him, but regarded him as a rascal on general principles; and he dropped his head and would have gone on with his work without a word had not Hot Heart spoke.

"Good-morning, Mr. Jigson."

"Mornin'!" growled Joseph.

"Are you well to-day?"

"Well enough!"

"Pray raise your head and let me look at you. I want proof. Let me see if your face is as round and rosy as usual."

Joseph straightened himself with a jerk, grounded his rake beside him, and with the watering-pot in his left hand, belligerently confronted his smiling visitor.

"I'd thank you to go your way hand leave me halone!" he declared. "I don't want hany loafers 'angin' haround 'ere. I 'ope you will take the 'int hand get hout!"

This was said with a manner more offensive than the words, but, shaking a warning finger at him the younger answered as coolly as ever:

"You are too cranky for your own good, Joseph. Have you forgotten who I am, and that I take my daily exercise by thrashing men who insult me?"

The gardener had forgotten whom he addressed, and as his temerity occurred to him, his face fell, and he looked very much alarmed.

"I've thrashed three men already to-day," the Fire-Eater added, "and I'm just going to drop on you."

"Old on! 'old on!" cried Mr. Jigson. "I will hapologize. I spoke habsent-minded. I didn't mean to offend. For 'Eaving's sake, don't hinjure me!"

The Hermit laughed lightly.

"All right, Joseph; I felt sure that such old friends need not disagree. A gentle word turneth away wrath. That's why I spoke so mildly. By the way, Joe, I came to see you on business. Have something of importance to say. Of course you will speak out like a little man."

"What is it habout?" Jigson uneasily asked.

"It is too important to mention here, where a spy might overhear us. If he did it would make matters mighty complicated for you. Step one side where we will be more private."

Joseph looked very much troubled, but dared not refuse. He followed the Fire-Eater, and for half an hour they talked steadily. An observer would have said they had momentous business, but, as luck would have it, no one saw them.

When the Hermit left the garden his face looked lighter than before, and he went home with long quick steps.

Somewhat to his surprise he found Red Jaguar waiting for him. The boldness and skill with which the chief came and went in broad day, when he was all the time being searched for, was remarkable. He seemed to avoid Paul and his allies by intuition.

Frazer greeted him kindly, and the Indian gave his hand as on a former occasion.

"Hot Heart," he then said, abruptly, "you are bold and generous, and not one to forget that red-men have rights, as well as white men."

"You are right, chief, and there are cases where their actual rights overweigh the supposed ones of pale-faces. I think you understand."

"Yes, and Red Jaguar's heart is warm toward his brother. Is Hot Heart going South?"

"Ha! have you penetrated the secret?"

"All is plain. Go on, Hot Heart, and victory will be yours. And it is so with the Indian."

The chief drew his noble figure up, and his strong face was full of a light which conveyed a good deal to Frazer.

"Chief, are you on the track?"

"Ask no questions, brother, but wait for the end. Let Nettleton hunt if he will; the Indian will soon be beyond his reach. After to-day, Hot Heart, we shall probably never meet again. You know what brought Red Jaguar to California, and I leave it to you to say whether his cause is just."

"It is just, and I wish you all success," the Fire-Eater warmly replied.

"Brother, I wish all white men were like you, but the buzzard never flies like the eagle. Brother, does the rose of Coast Castle look on you with interest? Will it be well with you in the future?"

Frazer hesitated for a moment, and then replied:

"It is hard to judge the female heart, but I hope for the best. This is in confidence; I would say it to no one else near Clifftown."

"Hot Heart shall never regret it. The Indian's heart is warm toward him; he wishes him well. Come with me, brother. Red Jaguar will soon be gone from California and there is one thing he must ask other hands to do."

"You can depend on me, chief."

"Then follow me."

And they passed from Convent Rest together.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

VILLEGAS BRINGS AFFAIRS TO A CRISIS.

DILIGENT labor sufficed to put the greater part of Coast Castle to rights that day, but it was no easy task. Loyola devoted all her time to relaying the carpets, and the other women saw that minor articles were restored to their proper places. By night all the rooms which were in general use had resumed their old appearance, and the commodore, who had wandered about in a most unhappy frame of mind during the earlier part of the day, began to recover his usual spirits.

One person did not grow more cheerful.

Leona Erwin carried a sad, half-frightened face wherever she went, and all the commodore's banter did not succeed in arousing her from gloom. This surprised him; he had always supposed her to be the bravest of her sex—always excepting Barbara—and her sudden timidity, as he supposed it to be, was something he would not have expected.

If Leona was timid, it was odd that she left the family a little after dark, put on her hat and went out into the night. She went straight to a certain part of the garden, and a man came out of the deeper shadows and met her.

It was Philip Warburton.

He extended his hand, but she shrunk back, and, somewhat piqued, he said:

"I found the note in my room, and have come as you requested."

"I wanted to see you," said Leona, hesitatingly.

"Well, I am here, as you see."

"Why do you suppose I sent for you?"

"Really, I have no idea."

"It was to warn you."

"To warn me!" echoed Warburton. "In regard to what, or whom?"

"Do you pretend that you do not know?" demanded Leona, vexation and sorrow mingling in her voice.

"I certainly do not."

"You force me to speak plainly, but I will do it, because I want to see you flee from Coast Castle and save yourself while you can. I believe that no one else has yet penetrated your secret; if it had been done, you would before this have been thrown into prison."

"In the name of all that is mysterious, what do you mean?" cried Warburton, in what seemed real amazement.

"Simply that you are the robber of Coast Castle!"

Despite his former suspicions, Warburton could not avoid recoiling in dismay. He loved Leona, and it was a startling accusation to hear from her lips.

"Leona!" he cried, "are you mad?"

"I begin to think I shall be," she almost sobbed. "Oh! Philip, Philip! I did not think this of you!"

And then she broke down entirely. Warburton felt half-distracted, but it was a case where some one ought to exercise good judgment and firmness. He put his arm around the sorrow-shaken figure, meeting with no resistance, and led the girl to a seat. She felt that she ought to cast off that criminal arm, but alas! she could never feel its support again, and she lacked the necessary firmness to deny herself one moment in the embrace of the man she loved, even though he was a robber.

"Now, Leona," said he, firmly, "tell me in plain words what has given you this strange idea."

His voice calmed her, and she answered with unexpected directness:

"I don't claim that I can prove you guilty, but this I do know: The evening before the morning the parchment was missed I saw you and Rosa together outside the house, and as I stood by an open window I heard you say to her, 'I must have it before morning!' That was all I did hear, for I did not listen, and I thought nothing about it then, but in the morning the parchment was gone. Then Rosa fled, and every one said she had been the ally of the robber. After that I remembered—"

"And is that all you have to charge against me?"

"I charge nothing; I will make you no trouble; and I am the greatest sufferer."

"Then borrow no more trouble. My words had the simplest meaning in the world. Commodore Nettleton had promised me a map of alterations he wished made in the plan of the grove about to be made north of the house; he was to give it to me that evening; he forgot it

and I went to the house. Rosa said he was busy and could not be interrupted; I declared that I must have the map before morning. Had you waited by the window, or gone at once to where the commodore was, you would have either heard Rosa call him out, or seen him join me. I can prove all I say by him—an authority not to be disputed. And this was my only crime."

Leona sat in silence, amazed, chagrined, yet happy.

"Your mistake was natural," Philip kindly added. "In such unsettled times as you have lately seen, any one is liable to seize upon a harmless sentence and magnify it to one wherein lurks crime and dark plots. And now, do you think I am the robber of Coast Castle?"

We need scarcely record her reply, nor dwell upon the interview; enough to say that when she rejoined the family in the sitting-room, half an hour later, the frightened light was gone from her eyes and the look of sadness from her face.

Little did she suspect, however, that her own strange actions during the last few days had given Barbara an equally erroneous suspicion. The latter had vaguely surmised that Leona had taken the parchment to worry Paul.

But neither yet knew the identity of the real robber.

The night passed peacefully at Coast Castle, and in the morning no rooms were found in disorder; the unknown visitors of the previous night had evidently satisfied their curiosity, and no longer thought the yellow parchment concealed in the house.

When Tim Welch brought over the morning mail from Clifftown there was one letter for Barbara.

It bore the San Francisco postmark, and was long. Miss Nettleton read it with emotion she rarely showed, but when the last line had been perused there was an expression on her face which showed that it had not contained ill news.

She at once sought Loyola and bade her tell Tim to saddle her horse, but as she went to her room to prepare for the ride, she looked out of the window and saw Don Esteban Villegas and Mrs. Hague coming up the avenue. She smiled, and then, abandoning all thoughts of the ride, went calmly down to the sitting-room.

In a few moments Mrs. Drake announced the two visitors—"to see Miss Nettleton privately."

Miss Nettleton smiled again, felt glad that Commodore Nick was not present, and ordered them admitted.

They came in, Zenobia looking dark and vicious, while the Mexican's face bore a triumphant look. He had expected to have his entrance disputed, and the fact that it was not gave him the idea that Barbara had convinced the commodore that it would never do to anger a man who held such a dangerous secret over Miss Nettleton's head.

He was a little worried by the calm manner in which they were received. Miss Nettleton appeared to be without a fear or trouble. She wasted no pleasant words on them, but her manner was not that of one who feels frightened.

Having seen them seated, she looked coolly, silently, at Don Esteban. He moved uneasily, and then said:

"Doubtless you are surprised to see us?"

"Not in the least."

Calm and even was the girl's voice, and the Mexican again felt that vague fear.

"I have brought Mrs. Hague this time."

"So I see."

"She has come as the avenger of her husband."

"I have come for justice!" declared Zenobia, sharply.

"Mrs. Hague, we have once talked of this matter before," said Barbara, who could not but pity the woman.

"Well, we'll talk again!" was the rude retort.

"Do you still blame me?"

"I hold you responsible for Palmer Hague's death."

"And I have told you I am innocent."

"You hired a man to kill him."

"What man?"

"Jigson or Welch."

"Still the old story!" exclaimed Barbara. "I regret to see, Mrs. Hague, that you are following the directions of a bad adviser. It will do you no good. Palmer Hague never came to harm through my means, directly or indirectly, and you cannot connect me with the crime. Do not compel me to withdraw my sympathy."

"This is fine talk," put in Villegas, "but it amounts to nothing; our case is too strong to be lost. Mrs. Hague, however, is more merciful than you deserve to find her, and she is willing to make a compromise. She will forgive you, being of a noble nature, if you will prove that you are penitent by bestowing your hand on Palmer Hague's best friend. In a word, marry me and you are safe; refuse, and you shall not only be put on trial for killing Hague, but the whole world shall know of your dark secret of the past."

"Is that all?"

Coolly Barbara asked the question.

"Isn't it enough?"

"Of the kind, yes."

"Are you still defiant?"

"I do defy you, sir. Bring up all the threats you choose, I defy you. More than this, I no longer temporize with you; never while life remains will I be your wife!"

Don Esteban sat dumfounded. He had thought that he came so prepared for the battle that he would carry all before him, and force Barbara consent to marry him within a week; he had the half-deranged Zenobia so subservient to his will that she would play any part in the matter that he desired; but now Miss Nettleton, instead of yielding tamely, defied him boldly.

"You are mad!" he exclaimed.

"Indeed!"

"Do you want me to tell all about that San Francisco affair?" he threateningly asked.

"No, for I will tell it myself, and in a way more correct than the version you would give of it. Some time before I left San Francisco, a man was drowned while sailing just beyond the city. City papers said he had been alone in the boat. One man knew different—Palmer Hague. He knew a woman had been in the boat with the man who was drowned, and he really thought it was I.

"He was wrong. The woman was my dearest friend, and he who was drowned was her deadly enemy. Through him she had suffered long and bitterly; it is not necessary to tell the story in full. I knew that they went sailing together, and when I knew he was drowned, I suspected why she had gone. It had been with a desperate purpose in her heart, and it had been accomplished by pushing her enemy overboard to drown.

"She never told me this, but I suspected it from the beginning. Why did I not say so? you will, perhaps, ask. It was because I knew what a noble nature was hers before she saw him, and how cruelly she had been made to suffer. I did not whisper my suspicion; I could not—would not—but, suspecting what I did, I was glad to get away from San Francisco.

"Then came Palmer Hague, whom I believed a single man. Twice before I had refused his offer; he now let me see he believed me a murderer, and practically demanded my hand. He knew that some woman had been in the boat with the drowned man, and circumstances were such—I need not go into details—that I could only prove my innocence by proving my friend's guilt. I do not know what madness possessed me then, but rather than betray my long-suffering friend, I decided to marry Hague. I did not hate him, and I could, perhaps, live with him without unhappiness."

She stopped, and Villegas broke in with a sneer:

"This is a fine, romantic story, but it won't go down in the least. Your insincerity is proven by the fact that you are now so willing to betray your 'poor long-suffering friend.'"

Miss Nettleton's eyes flashed.

"That unfortunate woman, sir, will never be put on trial by man. She is before a greater judge. This very morning I received news of her death. She died with a full hope in the mercy of that judge, even though she had just confessed that she killed her former enemy by pushing him from the boat. That mystery is now solved, and every effort of yours to connect me with it will fail. At last I can defy you!"

She arose and towered before him like a tragical queen.

"There is the door, sir. Begone, before I call the servants and have you cast out like the vile wretch that you are!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE TRAGEDY OF SHAKER'S TIMBER.

THE sun had made one-half of its forenoon visible journey. The day was unusually warm for the time of year, and scarcely any breeze was perceptible. The trees of Shaker's Timber stood with drooping branches. Only at rare intervals did a limb move. Nature seemed to stand still for the time.

Two men were entering the Timber at the northwest corner, passing over the bush-covered ridge. They were Paul Nettleton and detective Neat.

At the same time another man was entering the Timber at the southwest corner. This was Frazer Hot Heart. The distance that separated him and the other two men, and the intervening bushes of the ridge, prevented any of the trio from perceiving that so many persons were astray at once.

All, however, suspected that in the wood other men, or, at least, one man, were to be found—if the searcher was cunning enough to find them, or him.

Neat paused when he and Paul reached the wood proper.

"I think we had better separate," he said.

"We can thus cover a good deal more ground."

"Right!" said Paul tersely.

"Will you keep to the left?"

"Either way—yes."

"Then let us go on."

They advanced again. Mr. Neat drew a revolver and began to glide along lightly, keeping a sharp watch all around. He was so interested in this that he did not think of Paul for several moments. When he did, the young man was not visible. Neat was annoyed that he had not cautioned him against going too rapidly, but it was too late then, and it might be that Paul had merely branched further away to the left than intended, and so disappeared from Neat's view.

The detective went on in the same way he had begun.

The men already referred to were not the only persons in Shaker's Timber. A man was moving through the middle of the wood with caution and lightness which wholly eclipsed the detective's efforts.

The chief was following a trail. In his right hand he held a rifle ready for use, and as he glided along, following the trail with unerring skill, he ever and anon raised his eyes and swept a keen, quick glance around.

Whom was he trailing? What was his object? Why were all these men in Shaker's Timber? What meant this converging of hostile forces, which was liable to result in a tragedy?

Red Jaguar went on, drawing steadily near the base of Porcupine Ridge, then he suddenly paused, threw his head back and began drawing the air critically through his nostrils.

He smelled smoke, and though no fire was visible, easily located it.

It was not in the direction the trail was leading him. He glanced through a break in the tree-tops at the sun. Then he set off with long steps which were almost a run, his face toward the smoke.

Rapidly as he went his caution was never relaxed. His keen eyes were busy, and every tree, thicket and bush received due attention. He drew near the fire rapidly, and soon caught sight of the smoke, curling lazily upward.

After this he took care to keep a tree between it and him, and when still nearer, dropped on his knees and advanced with remarkable skill. His face was not so calm as usual now; an eager expression was upon it; his nostrils dilated and his eyes glittered.

Anon he saw the little fire burning by a tree, but, to his intense disappointment, no human being was visible. He reconnoitered carefully, and then approached it. He examined the ground with great care.

What to others would have been perplexing was clear to him. The man he had been trailing had built this fire, and it was probably done as a trick to lure on the pursuer. After building the fire the builder had gone back along his own trail. He was doubtless ambushed there, and the fire was intended to make the pursuer reckless and cause him to run into the trap.

Red Jaguar now had the advantage; he could follow the trail, not from the original direction, but from the rear, as it were, and come upon the ambusher in a way sure to surprise him.

The fugitive would thus be caught in his own trap.

The chief glanced at the sun again and then moved away, following the trail with all the renowned skill of his race. It assumed the form of an imperfect half-circle. He went where it led, moving rapidly but cautiously, scanning every thicket and tree as before, and holding his rifle ready for use.

He had gone a considerable distance when a dull, heavy sound was borne to his ears. It was followed by a second—a third. Then utter silence.

Red Jaguar paused and stood erect. He knew the meaning of those sounds well; they had been reports of one or more revolvers. And the sounds had come from the vicinity of the fire.

For a moment the chief hesitated, then, abandoning all caution, he ran toward the fire with long bounds which carried him over the ground at almost marvelous speed.

In the mean while, what had transpired at the fire?

Shortly before the revolver-shots sounded a man had come running through the timber as fast as he could go. This was not rapidly. He moved with a painful limp, and seemed scarcely able to use one leg at all. It was Garth Griffith, the Bush-Wolf.

He frequently looked over his shoulder, and he saw Paul Nettleton running in pursuit. The advantage was with the latter; he carried a rifle, while Garth had none.

The Bush-Wolf's condition was desperate. He was hunted by both Paul and Red Jaguar, and had sprained his ankle so badly that he could hardly step. His prospects were desperate and he knew it, but he had one consolation. Thus far, Hot Heart, the terrible, had not appeared, and, driven to bay, he had the brute courage to face the others.

He had, however, little hope of saving his life. Paul was gaining on him, and when he used

the rifle it would be with deadly effect. The Bush-Wolf's race was about run.

As he caught sight of the fire it gave him a sudden idea, however. His enemies should not triumph wholly. He dropped beside the blaze, and drew something from his pocket. What was it?

At first sight it seemed to be a yellow-hued paper, covered with writing in strange characters, but its texture was not that of paper. It was parchment; the dressed skin of some animal; but what the strange characters meant Garth did not know. He did not intend any other person should, either.

With an exultant gleam in his eyes he thrust the parchment into the fire.

A loud cry came from Paul, who was near enough to comprehend the act. Then sounded a revolver-shot, and a bullet tore through the Bush-Wolf's side.

Garth gave a great start. He felt from the first that that wound was fatal. But he turned upon his former employer, his teeth gleaming between his parted lips, and raised his own revolver. He was not one to miss usually, and he took care to shoot well this time.

His shot was almost instantly followed by another from Paul, and the Bush-Wolf dropped back on the ground and never stirred again. But Paul continued to advance, reeling like a drunken man, one hand outstretched, and his startled gaze fixed on the spot where the blaze was lapping the yellow parchment and reducing it to ashes—advanced almost to the fire, and then fell beside Garth, his hand still outstretched.

And this was the scene which Red Jaguar saw when he arrived. Two men lay there, seemingly dead. That outstretched hand directed his gaze, and he saw the parchment writhing in the flames, the characters already illegible.

Regardless of the heat, he clutched at it.

He touched only ashes; one-half crumbled in his hand.

The yellow parchment was beyond the reach of living man.

Red Jaguar stood gazing at the phantom of his hopes, and the shadow of utter despair was on his face. He was like one turned to stone, and the sound of approaching footsteps did not rouse him. Hot Heart and Neat rushed to the spot, but he was unconscious of their presence.

The sight of the motionless men on the ground brought both to a halt, and Neat gravely said:

"The Indian has killed them both!"

The chief turned slowly, and the expression on his face awed them. They had seen sorrow in many forms, but never like this. He was calm, but on his noble face was expressed such utter misery and woe as they had thought impossible for man to feel.

"It is gone—forever gone!" he said, hoarsely, looking at Hot Heart.

"Ha! You don't mean the parchment? Surely, not that, chief?"

"Look!"

Red Jaguar pointed, and as he did so the half of the parchment which remained in compact form, though only ashes, was seized with a new quiver. On the gray surface appeared strange, black characters; probably as they were written; but in a moment they died out and, with a final tremor, the mass separated and fell in scores of tiny pieces among the flames and fagots.

The parchment was, indeed, forever gone.

"Chief, how did it happen?"

Red Jaguar spurned the body of the Bush-Wolf.

"This dog burned it, to keep it from Nettleton."

"And they shot each other?"

"Yes."

Detective Neat looked doubtful, but at that moment Paul stirred; there was still life in his body. They turned him over, but his end was near.

"The parchment!" he gasped.

"Gone to ashes!" said Neat, curtly. "Who shot you?"

"Garth Griffith. My blood is on his hands. Where is he? Has he escaped? The parchment—"

His broken utterance ceased, and with that significant word on his lips—with the ruling passion strong in death—he breathed his last. The bargain between him and the Bush-Wolf was ended.

Neat glanced at the fire.

"The yellow parchment has done fatal work," he said.

"It is gone," replied Red Jaguar, "and with it the last hope of my race. I journeyed many miles to find it, but fate has been against me. The end has come, and I shall go back to my abiding-place with a heavy heart. The loftiest hope of my life is shattered, and there is nothing to keep me here longer. I shall go at once."

"Chief," said Frazer, "you have my most sincere sympathy."

"I know my brother's heart: it is strong and noble. After to-day we shall never meet again, but the Indian will often think of the only friend he had in a strange land."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE STORY OF THE PARCHMENT.

"BEFORE you go," said Neat, "I would like more light on the subject of this parchment."

"Hot Heart will tell you. Let me speak of it no more, for my heart is heavy."

Red Jaguar spoke pathetically, and then straightened himself and became again the warrior. He glanced at the sun, and added:

"Let no one wonder if Loyola is seen no more at Nettleton's. She goes with me to Mexico. We hoped to go in triumph, but it is not so to be. Pale-face searcher for secrets, farewell! Hot Heart, may all good fortune be yours! Say a good word for me to the rose of Coast Castle. Brother, farewell!"

"Farewell, chief, and may you be happy!" replied the Fire-Eater, earnestly.

Red Jaguar pressed his hand warmly, and then turned and walked away with a stately tread. They watched him in silence. Fifty yards away he turned and waved a graceful farewell, and then disappeared among the trees.

Detective Neat drew a long breath and looked more melancholy than ever.

"I'd like an explanation," he said. "Of course I suspect a good deal; I know that Red Jaguar is a descendant of the old Aztecs, or some contemporary tribe, and that the parchment related to his people; but there is a good deal of fog on my mind. Will you enlighten me?"

"Yes; and you shall hear a good deal which will never be told to any one else. It would be a terrible blow to the Nettletons to know Paul's real character."

"I will be as silent as the grave. I have had two cases here. One was to find the parchment; I have found it—in ashes. The other, and the real cause of my being at Clifftown, was to learn who killed Palmer Hague, and I have learned."

"Ha! Who was it?"

"Our precious friend, Garth Griffith, and he was hired by Don Esteban Villegas, Hague's false friend. Garth was to kill Hague on the way to the wedding, for Villegas wanted Miss Nettleton; but through a slip-up, Garth did his work later. I suspected the Bush-Wolf; found that the fatal bullet fitted his rifle; overheard him and Villegas talk; and had the matter down fine. Garth is dead, but Villegas will be arrested as the instigator of the crime. But about the parchment!"

Hot Heart sighed and said:

"I first heard of it when, some months ago, I found a friend of mine lying at the foot of a cliff, in Mexico, dying. His name was George Temple Bennett. He lived long enough to tell me that for some time he and one Paul Nettleton had been searching Aztec ruins in Mexico for the strange articles to be found there. They had made one wonderful discovery.

"Breaking into a ruin they had found there a tomb in which one, and only one, Aztec chief had been placed. Among other things they found there a parchment upon which was written strange characters. As they did not know its value they spoke of it freely, and a strange story was soon told.

"There was a legend that, at the time the Aztec power was declining, some great chief had died. Shortly before it had become plain to that unhappy people that they must yield to the Spaniard's heavy hand, and a vast amount of treasure in various forms was buried secretly. Only three men, of whom one was Montezuma, knew where it was buried, and it was agreed that the secret should be kept among them, each man, as he neared death, revealing the secret to his eldest son.

"One of the trio was a learned man, and he originated a secret cipher which should tell all, with the idea of having a copy in the hands of each of the three. These copies were made, each describing the burial-place of the vast treasure minutely; and to the account Montezuma added certain counsel to his people.

"The legend said that the unhappy monarch's copy was burned by an impious Spanish soldier, and that a second member of the trio was killed in battle and his copy somehow lost. Neither of these men lived to tell his secret to a son, or relative, though the latter had left a key to the cipher.

"But the first of the trio to die had been him who was buried in the death-vault. He had died when all the Aztecs were confused and alarmed, and his copy of the secret was buried with him by Montezuma's order. He had not transmitted his secret to any one, and the Aztec monarch, sorely beset by the Spaniards, neglected to provide a new holder for the parchment.

"You will thus see that owing to the war and overwhelming of the Aztecs, none of the three men told the secret to any one else, and of the three copies, one was burned, a second lost, and the third buried with the chief. So ran the legend, and it is easy enough to believe, when we remember how the Spaniards wronged and harassed the Aztecs.

"For generations it had been said among the constantly dwindling survivors of that people that if they knew where the tomb was, and the

parchment had resisted the hand of time—which, because of the way it was prepared, they believed it would—they could obtain the buried treasure and hear the words of counsel and wisdom recorded by Montezuma. The nature of the cipher had been retained among the descendants of that chief who was killed in battle, but without a copy of the parchment he could not find the treasure, and the key was useless."

"No sooner did Nettleton and Bennett hear this legend, and know the value of their discovery, than they took the parchment and fled, but Paul was villain enough to push Bennett over a cliff to his death, so that he could have all.

"This was the story Bennett told me. He died; I buried him and came here to await Paul's return, but he spent some time elsewhere before he came here, trying in vain to read the cipher. Finally, he hit upon the plan of having one learned in such matters assist him, so he sent for Professor Hazlitt and both came here. How zealously Hazlitt entered into the task you know.

"In the meanwhile, Red Jaguar had also come here to await Paul's return, as I was doing. Red Jaguar, though of mixed blood, was of Aztec descent, and the present holder of the key to the cipher. With him it was a sacred duty to recover the parchment, for not only would the immense fortune be recovered, but Montezuma's words would be known to his descendants. Loyola is of the Aztec blood, and though she came into the commodore's family naturally enough, she soon became the ally of Red Jaguar when he appeared.

"When the parchment was stolen from Paul, nobody was more surprised and alarmed than Red Jaguar. He settled upon Hazlitt as the thief, and with Loyola's aid, boldly visited the professor and tried to find the parchment. They failed. Then they tried again, and turned the whole house upside down, drugging all there. To avert suspicion, the chief drugged Loyola before he left the house.

"After this, everybody knew the parchment was not at Coast Castle. But where was it?"

"Zenobia Hague, half-insane, hating Barbara Nettleton, and anxious to do something to injure the family, went near the house the night of the robbery. She saw Rosa Strong. Talking cunningly, she prevailed on the girl to admit her secretly, 'so she could see Miss Nettleton.' Rosa weakly complied. Zenobia went in, saw Paul place the parchment in the drawer, wrenched the latter open and stole the parchment. What she had secured she did not know, and becoming frightened at something, she left the house, went back to Clifftown, and flung the parchment in a box as a useless article.

"When Rosa heard of the robbery she was frightened out of her wits. The hue and cry made about it, caused the silly girl to think she had committed a great crime in admitting Zenobia. Lacking courage to confess, she determined to flee. She prevailed upon Joseph Jigson to take a horse and carriage and drive her to Spur City, where she has since been in hiding.

"Thirty-six hours ago I heard that she was there, and who had carried her. I saw Jigson. He was in sore mental trouble, because Rosa was supposed drowned and he dared not explain otherwise. I made him confess yesterday, when I visited him in the garden, and then went to Rosa and secured her confession. When I knew of Zenobia's secret visit, I felt sure she was the thief.

"Red Jaguar had arrived at the same conclusion through pure detective work; your suspicions, Mr. Neat, were aroused by Zenobia's false tale before the magistrate in which she spoke of having seen Rosa; and a few words dropped by Zenobia, herself, put Garth Griffith on the track.

"There was a general rush for the parchment. Garth won, stole it and fled, but was hotly pursued by Red Jaguar and the rest of us. We have seen the end here, and the parchment is gone forever. Paul has lost the coveted fortune and his life, and Red Jaguar will never realize the lofty hopes he had for his race. Poor fellow! I pity him most of all."

Hot Heart ceased, and there was a brief silence. Then Neat aroused and said:

"One word about the occasion when you were taken before Huglife the magistrate. Don't blame me for that. I never believed you guilty. I suspected there was a plot against you, and gave the plotters rope to hang themselves. It was because I believed you innocent that I insisted on your going on bail. I have since worried the truth from Garth; he was hired by Don Esteban to swear that he saw you push Rosa into Nigger Arm, but his courage failed."

"The Bush-Wolf was hired by two men to kill me," said Frazer, gravely, "but his bargain has proved a bad one for him. Speaking of Nigger Arm, do you know where Bill Peters is?"

"Isn't he drowned?"

"He never was in Nigger Arm. As a servant of Paul Nettleton he, of course, knew about the parchment. Paul feared he would talk about it, so he decoyed him to the ruin, shot and buried him there. I afterward found the fatal revolver, but suspected nothing.

"Providence watched over Peters, however. Under the ruins were secret vaults. Red Jaguar had found them and lived there, unknown even to me, a part of the time. In burying Peters, Paul dug so low that Red Jaguar, being below, saw him; and the chief took the buried man down, found life in him, and has actually brought Peters around. Paul was once in the vaults, but Red Jaguar had made a secret room for the wounded man, and he was not found.

"Red Jaguar told me this secret yesterday, asking me to care for Peters when he was gone. The latter is mending rapidly, and can be moved to Coast Castle any time.

"Now, Mr. Neat, Paul Nettleton is dead, and though we must tell the main story of the parchment, in humanity's name we will keep from his relatives the fact that he murdered Bennett, and tried to do the same with Peters. I know the latter will consent, for the commodore's sake, and it would kill poor old Commodore Nick. It is bad enough, as it is."

"You can rely on me, Mr. Hot Heart—"

"Call me Frazer. My real name is Maurice Frazer. Hot Heart, of course, was only an alias assumed while I played the absurd part of a fire-eater, which I did, so that no one need wonder what I was doing near Clifftown. As a reckless adventurer, I escaped the notice of inquiring minds."

"Very well, Mr. Frazer, as I was about to say, my lips shall never betray Paul Nettleton. His misdeeds have recoiled on his own head. The fact that he is dead will be, in itself, a severe blow to those who are as noble as he was evil."

Let the record of the yellow parchment, and the events it brought about, be closed by a glance at the state of affairs a year and three months after the date of our story.

Detective Neat had done his work well, and though greatly puzzled by the mystery of the parchment, he had scored some success by actual good work.

Don Esteban Villegas, driven from Coast Castle by Miss Nettleton, fled to the South, was pursued by Neat and shot in a fight with the officer. He lived to confess that Palmer Hague had been shot by Garth Griffith at his instigation. His two tools, Lopez and Jose, had accompanied him in his flight and made good their escape.

Zenobia went back to San Francisco, and was heard of no more.

Professor Hazlitt was almost heart-broken by the loss of the parchment, but he continued his erudite labors as before, in other places.

Rosa Strong returned to Coast Castle, and she and Jigson were freely forgiven. They, with Welch and Mrs. Drake, continued in the commodore's service. Rosa is still wooed by both Joseph and Tim, but she has not accepted either.

As Red Jaguar intimated, Loyola disappeared that eventful day and was never seen at Coast Castle again. Commodore Nick did not want to see her. When he knew it was she and the chief who had drugged his whole household, and tore everything up in such style, he wanted no more of Loyola.

Garth Griffith was buried in the Timber and no one mourned for him, but Paul rests under an elaborate stone. His relatives never knew of his crimes, while his conduct at Coast Castle served to make them more reconciled to his death.

Bill Peters proved himself a heart of oak. He recovered from his wound, and, so attached was he to his old commander, the commodore, he never breathed a word of the truth. People were allowed to think some stray vagabond wounded him.

Coast Castle was soon made a double mansion.

This change was made necessary by the fact that both Barbara and Leona married. Miss Nettleton became the wife of the man she saved from hanging once upon a time, and people have almost forgotten that Frazer was once called Hot Heart or Fire-Eater. Of course Leona married Philip Warburton, and she no longer regards him as a thief.

He has stolen but once, and the article taken was Leona's heart; but as he gave his own in return, she fully forgave him.

Frazer and Warburton manage the ranch, and Commodore Nick, perfectly satisfied with his "two sons," as he calls them, is always happy. He and Bill Peters smoke and tell stories, and watch the children, who have appeared, ride upon Jack Jet's back.

The ex-Fire-Eater often thinks of Red Jaguar, and hopes that he is well and prosperous, but over the memory of the noble chief will always hang a veil of sadness. He can well understand what a blow the loss of the parchment was to a man of such lofty nature and ambition as animated the descendant of the old Aztecs.

THE END.

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